

unlikely events

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unlikely events

by [Nymphii](#)

Summary

Something is brewing. A great storm that could shatter life as its known. More and more often, androids are breaking free of their original programming. More and more often, androids are turning against their owners in increasingly violent ways.

And the only ones that can stop it are Wilbur Soot—the youngest lieutenant in police history and now a drunk, washed out detective—and an android of the 1NN1T model named Tommy, an advanced prototype created to solve crimes and catch rogue androids. But first they actually have to get along.

Or,

Two idiots, a robot and a depressed detective, walk into a bar. One comes out experiencing emotions he shouldn't be able to, and the other comes out with a reason to live.

Spoilers for Detroit: Become Human, but knowledge of the game isn't necessary to enjoy.

- Translation into Español available: [Eventos improbables](#) by [ScapeSystem](#)

the first trial

Chapter Summary

Enter the Robot.

unlikely events

"Statistically speaking, there's always a chance for unlikely events to take place."

-Connor

—

Chapter One: The First Trial

—

The sight is grim. An android, blue staining his white pants where one of his men got a shot on him, standing on the edge of the roof. The little girl in his arms, who can't be older than nine, sobs loudly. It's messy, tears and snot running down her face in a way that is unique only to children. Like an iPad kid, Quackity would've said.

The thought almost makes Sapnap smile, but then again, the situation is too serious for that.

Her knee is skinned, an ugly red patch with blood steadily dripping down her skin and into her exposed sock. There will be more blood if they don't step in soon.

The helicopters circle around the building like sharks, blades creating a violent wind and bright lights illuminating the rooftop. One of his men lies to the side of the roof, hand pressed to his rapidly bleeding wound.

Sapnap clenches his jaw. The situation is rapidly growing dire. There are two dead bodies in the living room, a hysterical mother screaming for her child, said child who's currently being held hostage, an unpredictable robot, and one of his men bleeding to death.

"Captain?" Another of his men approaches quickly, gun tucked firmly in his grip. Although his body and words are pointed at him, his eyes watch the rogue android with trepidation. Sapnap can't blame him; after all, he wants the fucking thing dead, too. "What are your orders?"

With a rough hand running over his face, Sapnap steps away from the plastic sheet in front of the entrance to the roof. It's dangerous to be standing there, and he could've easily been shot, but he needed to get a look at the situation with his own two eyes. Now, however, he can fall back. With long, purposeful strides, he motions for the SWAT man to follow. "We can't send any more of our men out there. It's firing at everything that moves, and there's no negotiating with a robot."

The man inclines his head.

Sapnap turns sharply, entering the master bedroom. On a large desk that wraps around an entire side of the room, several wide monitors display video footage of the rooftop. For a moment, he allows his attention to be stolen away, and his eyes watch the slightly grainy image.

“Sir?” the officer prompts.

With a rough cough, Sapnap turns to him. “But we can’t have the snipers take it out yet. Doing that would result in her death.” It is a little unfair—he could acknowledge this somewhere deep within his mind—that he’s unloading all this unasked information. But talking out loud helps him think, and Sapnap wants the man to understand the complexity of the situation. He angrily works his jaw.

“Sir... if I may...” The officer is so hesitant, eyes dodgy and refusing to meet his own. Sapnap inclines his head. “There’s always... you know... Cyberlife’s offer...”

Sapnap stiffens. Fucking Cyberlife and their goddamn offers. If it wasn’t for Cyberlife and their faulty creations, they wouldn’t be in this mess in the first place. Now they wanted to swoop in, fix the mess *they* created, and come out of it like some kind of hero? No, Sapnap refuses.

But then his thoughts stray to Ben, bleeding out on the roof. Ben, whose pregnant wife relied on him. They can’t afford to lose any more men. They can’t afford to lose little Clementine.

With a heavy sigh, Sapnap carefully sets aside his pride for the good of his men. “Bring in the negotiator.”

August 15th, 2038

8:29 PM

The sound of the quarter pinging off his fingers is one of the few sounds breaking the tense silence, accompanied only by the steady noise of the elevator ascending quickly. He watches the numbers tick up out of the corner of his vision as the coin dances along his fingers. The metal is smooth and cold along his skin. Everything is so crisp, from the faint pollution in the air to the tiny, imperceptible sounds of the elevator's inner gears.

Tommy takes it all in but lets nothing distract him. He has a mission to complete, and he will let nothing stand in his way. Having calibrated his system and loosened the joints in his hand, he tucks the coin away in a small breast pocket. Faintly, he can see his distorted image in the sleek metal doors. He squints at it before adjusting his red tie and smoothing out his expression into something pleasant.

He is Cyberlife’s greatest creation. He refuses to be anything less than presentable.

The elevator slows to a stop at floor seventy, and the doors slide open smoothly.

Two SWAT men stand on either side of the elevator. One detaches from his post and, although he neither greets him nor shows any indicating signs of noticing him, Tommy follows. The man presses a hand to the tiny earpiece and says, “the Negotiator is on site.”

The Negotiator. It’s an appropriate title for him, all things considered.

As soon as Tommy steps foot off the elevator, the SWAT man disappears down the long hallway.

Tommy hesitates. He blinks, and it's like time slows down as he scans his surroundings quicker than the average human can blink. To the side, there’s a narrow shelf littered with unimportant decorations—family photos, a small bowl filled with keys, and a potted plant amongst other things. His sensors fixate on the family photo, and his system provides the information with little prompting.

He picks up one of the pictures, thumb tracing the smooth glass. In it, a family of three—Daniel Manifold, his wife Rebecca, and their daughter Clementine—are in a park. In little Clementine’s hand, a large ice cream cone is held.

Tommy gently sets the picture back down and carries on.

On the left side of the elevator, a portion of the wall is made up entirely of an aquarium. The glass and water glow with an eerie light, illuminating the wide hallway. Tommy steps forward. There are two small marks marring the surface—bullet holes that have shattered the glass at the top. With a crunch of glass underfoot, he notices the water pooling on the ground.

His eyes catch on a small fish on the ground, frantically flopping in the too small puddle. Although he’s very aware of every millisecond wasted, Tommy can’t help but stop and stare. Left alone, the fish will surely die.

And yet, he has a mission to attend to, one with consequences much more severe than the death of a fish.

With sure movements, he carefully scoops the fish up and deposits it back into the half-filled tank. He lingers for one more moment as it swims away into the artificial brush.

Software Instability: ^

Tommy blinks a few times as his system attempts to re-stabilize.

Then, he turns sharply on his heel and walks with sure steps towards the unseen living room. As he’s about to turn the corner, another SWAT man rounds it, hauling a woman with him. It’s Rebecca Manifold, shabbily dressed and shaking in the man’s arms. Tommy quickly scans her; he takes in her tear-slick cheeks, her frantic gaze, her trembling vestige. The conclusion he comes to is this: traumatized and distressed, but ultimately unharmed.

At least physically. Tommy doesn’t doubt that this situation will leave mental scars that will last quite some time.

Her wet eyes find his, and it's clear in the subtle shift in her demeanor that she immediately latches on. She lunges for him, like a wild and unpredictable cat, hands finding an uncomfortable place clinging to his wrists. "Please," she begs, voice thick with tears and desperation. "Please, sir, you have to save my little girl."

Tommy's never been called sir before. That's a title reserved for humans and humans alone. He isn't sure what to make of it, so he merely blinks in the face of her intensity.

As bony fingers dig into him, her eyes travel his expressionless face and land on the circular LED casually spinning on his temple—basically a neon sign that he is not, in fact, a human. He watches the way her expression freezes and then slackens. "You're sending... an android." Her voice is dead, as if all her hope flew out the window in a single second. As she holds onto him, dull nails sinking into his skin, he stares into the eyes of a parent picturing their child's imminent death. "Why—why aren't you sending a real person? Do you want her to fucking die? Don't let that—that *thing* anywhere near her."

Rebecca Manifold is quickly wheeled away, but her touch and venomous words persist much longer than she does. Although none of his synthetic skin has been pierced, the unsettling pressure lingers; the phantom pain of hands squeezing imaginary bruises.

But pain isn't the right word for it, is it? Androids don't experience pain.

Tommy blinks, quickly dispelling that line of thought in favor of one more on track. An objective blinks in the corner of his vision, a frantic reminder of its existence and incomplete status. He latches onto it. He needs to find Captain Sapnap.

He turns the corner.

The living room is spacious and comfortable. Or at least, it must've appeared that way several hours earlier. Right now, furniture is knocked askew and little objects that must've lined the shelves now clutter the floor. In the middle of the room, a dead body lies, face down, with a tablet in hand. His sensors itch—or, at least, that's the best way to describe the strange sensation, the incessant need for information—as they attempt to automatically scan the man.

However, as he's lying face down in a pool of his own blood, the facial recognition software does absolutely nothing.

Tommy itches to launch right into the investigation, but the objective blinks in the corner of his vision once again. He ignores the mess strewn about, ripe with potential clues to be analyzed, and even walks past empty rooms with doors thrown wide open. He pokes his head into the last door at the end of a long hallway.

There, huddled in the corner, is a group of men crowded around a computer screen. The lights illuminate their tense faces, casting them in pale blue light. Tommy steps in, hand lingering on the door frame. "Captain Sapnap?"

The man in the middle glances up. He's a younger man with just a hint of stubble cropping up around his jaw and with black hair pulled back into a low ponytail. Automatically,

Tommy's system provides him with information, and Tommy, almost lazily, shifts through it. One of the youngest captains on the SWAT team in history. His track record is impressive, but his cold, dismissive gaze is anything but. He barely represses a sigh—deep down in his artificial guts, he can feel that this man is going to be difficult.

At the appraising stare, Tommy straightens and strides across the room. "My name is Tommy. I'm the android sent by Cyberlife."

Sapnap gives him another critical look before turning back to the monitor. Now that he's shifted over a little, Tommy can see that it's supplying a video feed of the situation. "It's firing at everything that moves," he says, finally, when Tommy becomes sure that he's pretending as if no interruption occurred. "Two of my men have already been shot."

Two SWAT men plus the dead civilian are in the living room. Already, that is a staggering amount of casualties. The heavy feeling of failure looms over him. "Do you know the deviant's name?"

Sapnap scowls. "Why would I know?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Tommy can see his own stress levels rise a percent. He narrows his eyes at the back of Sapnap's head. Is the captain being difficult on purpose to spite Tommy—an android incapable of feeling spite—or is he just naturally like this?

Either way, this attitude is not conducive to the literal hostage situation taking place outside.

"Information is important to a hostage situation," Tommy begins slowly, choosing his words very carefully. "It would make sense that you would have information pertaining to the situation." For all that logic, it only gets him an irritated, over-the-shoulder glare that's gone the next second. Tommy quickly represses the sigh building in his internal fans. "Do you know any helpful information about the deviant? A motive, maybe?"

Something in Tommy's tone must've upset Sapnap, because the next moment the captain is crowding close. His eyes are narrowed, and his lips are pulled back into a wordless snarl. "Yeah, I know that the 'deviant' shot two of my men and is threatening to jump off a roof with a little girl. And you're here wasting my goddamn time with useless questions."

Tommy can feel the LED at his temple burn a brief yellow—his system's warning sign of malfunction and elevated stress levels. Sapnap's difficult behavior is the true culprit of time wasting. These questions are obviously important, or Tommy wouldn't bother with them.

Figuring he's exhausted Sapnap of his knowledge and patience, Tommy turns on his heel. Glancing around the room, his eyes catch on a silver case strewn haphazardly across the floor. He leans down to get a closer look; the case is filled with solid black foam with a gun-shaped impression in the middle. Daniel Manifold must've kept a gun in his closet, and, since the deviant was able to shoot several people, he must've known that, too.

So the deviant is armed with Mr. Manifold's gun. That's not surprising, but it is helpful, and it just adds to the information building about this case. The probability of success rises a bit; after all, knowledge is power.

Tommy stands up, ignoring the burning gaze of the captain, and strolls out of the room. He's extracted every ounce of information he can from that room. Instead, he chooses one of the other empty rooms. The space around him was clearly crafted with a young girl in mind. The walls are painted a colorful orange, and a smaller—twin-sized—bed rests its headboard against the far wall. A desk is crammed into the corner, littered with magazines, textbooks, and a tablet. Tommy reaches out, careful picking up the unlocked device.

A video is the first thing to pop up, probably the last thing Clementine watched. Tommy presses play. It's shakily filmed from the front-facing camera, and Clementine's toothy grin greets him. She tilts the camera, allowing it to show the deviant with one of her arms wrapped around its neck. "This is Jack," she explains brightly. "He's the coolest android in the whole world. Say hi, Jack."

Jack, a PL600 model typically used for child care, waves. His face is etched in a permanent smile, although his eyes are crinkled in a way that, according to his own system, was never programmed into his model. "Hello!"

"He's my best friend," Clementine says seriously, intense eyes focused on Jack. "We'll always be together."

Something in Jack's face softens from the artificial happiness of an android to something more human. He gazes fondly at the girl.

As the play button pops up again, signaling the end of the video, Tommy sets the tablet down.

Something obviously must've changed. Androids are built with specific coding that doesn't allow them to harm humans. Even police androids aren't capable of it. Not only that, but, considering the signs of deviancy in the video, it's entirely possible that Jack deluded himself into thinking he could feel emotions. That he loved Clementine. It seems, at least of the rudimentary profile he's building so far, out of character for the android.

If he's going to face him, he needs to know the motive.

Stepping away from the desk, he scans the hostage's room. There, on the ground behind her bed, he finds a pair of wireless headphones. Music pours from them, quiet enough to the human ear, but perfectly audible to his. Still, he goes through the motions of bringing it up to his ears.

Clementine was listening to music. She never even heard the gunshots.

Tommy places the headphones on the ground.

Re-entering the living room from Clementine's room is a shock to the system. Gone are the colorful walls and imaginative furniture. Her room was also untouched except for the few disconcerting but vital pieces of evidence. The living room—and by extension the kitchen, since there is no wall separating the two—is strewn with shattered glass and bullet holes.

Tommy makes a bee line for the body he reluctantly ignored earlier. With a steady hand, he gently pushes the man's body over. It slumps over awkwardly, body already stiffening with the effects of death. His blank, unseeing eyes meet Tommy's, and his scanner automatically supplies the information he needs.

Daniel Manifold lies dead on his own living room floor, shot three times by his own android, if the weeping bullet holes in his chest are anything to go by.

Tommy reaches out, fingers gently finding his eyelids and closing them for him. It's the respectful thing to do, or at least he thinks so. He sits back on his heels and surveys the scene. His reconstructive programming fires, analyzing the way his body had hit the floor and reconstructing the scene. Tommy watches the rough outline of Daniel getting shot and collapsing off the chair.

Since all the bullets entered from his back, it's safe to assume Daniel had been unaware of the danger. He was distracted with something, perhaps?

Tommy scans the room, eyes latching on an innocuous tablet tucked away underneath one of the chairs. After quickly and almost subconsciously analyzing the trajectory, he determines that this must be it, and that it slipped out of Daniel's hand when he hit the ground.

He retrieves the tablet, thumb wiping through the blood splattered on the glass. This, like the last one, is unlocked. When he turns it on, an order confirmation for an AP700 model flickers on the screen.

Oh, Jack, Tommy sighs internally as the puzzle pieces slot into place.

Jack had deluded himself into thinking he loved Clementine. He even deluded himself into thinking that maybe he was a part of this little family. And then he found out that they were replacing him.

The more information is presented, the clearer the picture becomes. Tommy immerses himself in the shattered pieces of Jack's mind until he can *feel* his fragmented thoughts. If he focuses hard enough, he can almost wrap himself in the deviant's delusion as well; he can almost feel the simulated pain of the realization, of the original code gone wrong in some way until something artificial was a little less so.

Pieces of conversations and dialogue options pop into his mind as his system works to provide him with everything he'll need to talk Jack down.

But still, he doesn't have *enough*.

Tommy sets the tablet back where he found it and stands back up. There's another body in the odd grey area between the kitchen and living room, where the Manifolds have shoved a dining table. The man is slumped over in front of the table, opposite an opaque, plastic curtain they've set up to block the shattered glass doors to the roof.

The man, who Tommy quickly figures out was the first responder to the scene, has a bullet hole straight through the heart. Just like Mr. Manifold, he slides the man's eyes shut, but

doesn't further disrupt the body. The way he's slumped over, hand stretched out towards something unseen, is very telling.

Tommy glances up towards the plastic curtain, noting the blue splattered on it and the sole shoe laying in front of it. It's almost impressive, he thinks absently, how the small shoe has remained undisturbed with the officers fluttering about.

Putting together the thirium—the blue liquid that functions as a sort of 'android blood'—on the curtain and the odd posture, Tommy determines that the man got a shot off on Jack before dying. A quick search around the immediate area confirms the obvious; Tommy finds a gun lying underneath a chair pushed into the table. The metal is smooth and cool under his touch, but he hesitates to pick it up. Androids aren't supposed to carry guns. In fact, it's against the law for them to.

Androids also aren't supposed to hurt humans.

Tommy's hand closes around the handle of the gun, and he tucks it into the waistband of his pants. There's no guarantee he'll use it, but it's like that human idiom; he'd much rather have it and not need it than need it and not have it. Besides, it'd be useful if the negotiations went wrong.

Not that they will, though, because Tommy doesn't have any options other than success.

He stands up and finds himself right in front of the plastic curtain. SWAT men flank him on either side, not unlike earlier when he first stepped out of the elevator. He hesitates, central processing whirring as he mentally scans the entire room one more time. It's unlikely that he missed any evidence, so that 76% probability of success is the highest he'll get going into the negotiation.

With one last moment, where Tommy takes a deep breath and pushes away all the unnecessary stimuli—like the sound of the boiling pot on the stove, a dinner never eaten and long forgotten. Then, he draws open the curtains and steps outside.

Immediately, a gunshot echoes in the night. Warnings pop up, obscuring his vision ever so slightly as his system screams at him about thirium loss and external damage. Tommy glances down to his arm where exposed wires blink frantically. There's blue blood on this side of the curtain now, too. The wound—if it can even be called that—drips thirium sluggishly, staining his torn suit jacket. He glances back up.

“Stay back! If you come any closer, I'll jump!”

Jack is exactly as he appeared in the video, but not at the same time. He looks the same—a smooth, young face that will never age, close cropped hair, and dull brown eyes. But there's something different about him; his movements are jerky and frantic, eyes wide and panicked, and there's something about him that just feels... feral. Unhinged.

Even from thirty feet away, he feels dangerous.

Tommy takes another—albeit unnecessary—breath, once again focusing himself on what’s important and not on the strange lurch in his abdominal cavity when he first saw Jack, desperate and unsure and looking exactly like someone way in over their head, someone who can’t back out now.

No, he doesn’t focus on that at all. Instead, he assesses the situation.

Jack stands on the edge of the roof top, heels hanging off the edge with the perfect balance only achieved by a machine. Clementine is held awkwardly in his grasp, an arm circled around her waist like a particularly stubborn cat. Her sobs carry over, even above the sound of the circling helicopters, and the light reflects off her wet cheeks. Jack’s LED is circling a harsh red, and in his hand, Daniel Manifold’s gun is clenched desperately. He waves it around wildly, almost as if he’s unsure of what to do with it.

Tommy nearly flinches at the number of times the barrel points at poor Clementine. At least there’s some assurance that Jack, as an android, is statistically unlikely to make a mistake and accidentally fire it. Still, not much is known about deviancy—the novel incident that it is--and it remains unclear what exactly goes wrong in the code. Who knows what else it could affect?

“Please,” she begs, but says nothing more, like she truly can’t say anything other than plead for her life. Tommy can’t even imagine how frightening this is for her.

He will save her, no matter the cost.

With a grim sort of determination pumping through his veins, Tommy smiles. “Hi, Jack! My name is Tommy,” he calls out above the deafening roar of chopping blades and whipping wind.

Startled eyes find his, face slack in uncertainty. “How—” he pauses, tongue flicking out to lick his lips. For some reason, the action sticks with him. Maybe because it feels so authentic, so glaringly and entirely human. It looks odd on an android. “How do you know my name?”

Tommy raises his hands up, a sign of surrender and goodwill, and tests his luck with a small step forward. Jack’s sharp, wild eyes watch his movements, but he doesn’t pitch himself off the roof or riddle Tommy with bullets, so he’ll take this as a win. “I know a lot about you, Jack. I’m here to get you out of this.”

Jack’s eyes scan his face, searching for any deception. He’ll find nothing in the careful neutrality, however.

One of the helicopters passes overhead, so low to the roof that, for a terrifying moment, Tommy fears that it will knock them over, and that he will fail. Thankfully, it doesn’t. The force of its blades douse them in pool water and send several of the lounge chairs flying. An alert pops up in the corner of his vision.

Probability of Success: 61%^v

Tommy frowns. The helicopters are supposed to be there as a protective measure, but they're only making things worse. Jack had begun to relax a little, but now his shoulders are tense, body hunched over Clementine, pressing the gun to her temple. His eyes dart around wildly, unsure of what exactly to watch—the approaching android or the circling sharks.

His objectives—gain the deviant's trust and approach slowly—blink again, a cruel and unnecessary reminder. As if he was capable of forgetting. Tommy takes another step forward, softening his face into something sympathetic and friendly. He does take this moment to remind himself of his role: he's here not only to protect Clementine, but to aid the troubled deviant and hopefully capture him in working condition.

With yet another step, he assesses the situation again, paying special attention to the intricacies of Jack's expression. There's anger, held in the curl of his lips—of course there had to be anger, for him to turn on the child he was supposed to protect—but there's also fear in his furrowed brow and pain in his eyes. Tommy isn't sure if deviancy somehow allows androids to feel pain, but the way Jack favors his left side does not go remiss.

Wild and desperate, hair plastered to his skin with chlorinated water and circling LED casting an ominous red light over his expression, Jack paints the perfect picture of someone striking out because of the pain of a betrayal.

Something in Tommy lurches, an unknown sensation that has his own LED circling yellow for the briefest moment—yet another gentle warning that something is not quite right.

With a deep breath to reset the course of his processing, he selects the best approach. Browsing through the dialogue options generated from before, he speaks. "I know you're angry. I know you're hurt. But you've gotten yourself into a bad situation, and, right now, I need you to trust me." Jack's expression twists, looking as if that truly is the last thing he wants to do. Tommy shrugs in a very 'what-can-you-do' way. "I know, I know. I'm just this random android brought in to do the human's dirty work. But this is a two way-street, Jack. I can't help if you don't let me."

Something in Jack cracks a little, softened by his empathetic tone and by his carefully chosen body language. Still, his fingers twitch around the grip of the gun. "I don't want your help. I don't *need* it!"

Tommy bites his lip and waits.

His risky gambit pays off, and Jack's shoulders slump a little more. "Nobody can help me. Not now. Not after what I've done. I just want this to end." His voice cracks over the words, sounding less manic and more grief-stricken.

Probability of Success: 65% ^

That strange sensation pangs, this time near his thirium pump—the biocomponent most like the human heart. Absently, Tommy worries that something may be wrong, internally. But no new warnings pop up, so he pushes it to the back of his processor to be dealt with later.

He steps forward a little further, and his eyes catch on a body to the side, slumped over near the edge. A quick, basic scan reveals that the man is still alive, but barely conscious due to blood loss. Tommy hesitates, fingers twitching.

The gun, which had been drooping in Jack's uncertain grip, suddenly jerks up right. "Are you armed?"

Tommy slowly slides his eyes from the wounded man to Jack. He pauses, head tilted to the side as he considers his options. The gun currently tucked into his waistband seems to warm against his skin, as if Jack's gaze is burning it with his intensity. He could lie to him, but Tommy decided long ago to go a peaceful route. Now, the gun has no use except as a bargaining chip, a tool to gain trust. And he will get Jack to trust him. Everyone will leave this building unharmed.

"Yes, I have a gun."

The gun gripped in Jack's hand shakes. "Drop it. Any sudden moves, and I'll shoot."

Tommy raises his hands where Jack can clearly see them, then, with slow, purposeful movements, reaches behind him. His fingers curl around the sleek handle, and the metal drags against his back as he pulls it out. He watches the way Jack's eyes narrow in on the weapon, but no bullet tears through him. With a careless toss, the gun disappears with a skitter on wet pavement.

Jack relaxes minutely.

Probability of Success: 71% ^

Tommy swallows around nothing. "I had a gun, but I didn't shoot you. I could've. It certainly would've ended things quicker—" Jack tenses, eyes narrowing on his face. "—but I didn't. Do you know why?" Silence. He doesn't seem keen to answer. "Because I..." he hesitates for a barely perceptible moment, acid building on his tongue, "I *want* to help you. I'm not going to hurt you, Jack. Not when I had such a clear chance before."

Jack eyes him mistrustfully. "If you shot me, then she'd fall as well. Don't try and lie to me." Clementine whimpers and squeezes her eyes shut.

Tommy tilts his head. "Maybe. But I'm a state-of-the-art prototype. Do you really think I wouldn't be able to shoot you in some way the incapacitated you without risking her?" The truth was a very simple no; it's the reason why negotiation was the only option going forward, and why Jack hadn't been incapacitated earlier. But Jack, for all his harried glances and frantic words, likely wouldn't notice the bluff for what it is.

And it seems he doesn't. Jack's mouth sets in a firm, displeased line, but he doesn't show any other signs of aggression.

Tommy casts his mind back to the evidence he collected earlier, searching for a thread. After a moment of reviewing carefully, he finds it. "I know why you're doing this, Jack." Tommy takes another step, but to the side instead of forward, towards the man slumped over. If he

can apply a makeshift tourniquet, he might be able to slow the blood flow enough until Jack has been subdued. “You thought you were a part of the family. You gave them your care and your love, and in return...” Tommy spreads his hands out in front of him. “They betrayed you. It’s understandable, really. Anyone would become upset after finding that out.”

Jack’s face slackens, eyes wide. “Yeah, anyone would be,” he agrees faintly.

Tommy’s eyes slide over, finding a place on Clementine’s terrified face. “But this isn’t okay. Lashing out like this... killing humans... this isn’t okay. Nothing about this situation is okay right now. But it can be. If you let me help.”

And, as Jack eyes him warily, Tommy watches as something interesting happens. He watches the mistrustful look start to fall away, giving way to a cautious hope, frail and small and carefully hidden.

Probability of Success: 81% ^

“It’s like you said. I... I thought I was part of the family. Jack Manifold, that’s what I called myself.” Jack scoffs, broken and tired. Tommy squats down, eyes watching the deviant as he looks into the distance, drowning in his feelings. “What a joke. I was never part of the family. I was just a toy. An object.” Tommy reaches up, deft fingers finding the carefully knotted tie and undoing it quickly. It slips away from his neck and into his waiting hand. “Some old thing to throw away when something shiny and new comes along.”

The wounded man glances up, unfocused eyes fixing on Tommy’s face. His sensors fire, providing information that only serves to overwhelm him. He sends it all away, only latching onto the man’s—Ben’s—name. He attempts a comforting smile, although he fears it comes out as more of a grimace. With a gentle hand, he ties the red cloth tightly above the wound on his arm.

Standing up, Tommy redirects his attention. “I know it feels like that, but it’s not true. And by—by doing this?” he gestures to Clementine, still crying faintly and with blood slowly dripping down her shin. “You’re just proving them right.” Jack flinches. “Proving that you’re some—some broken machine that needs to be replaced. But you’re not, are you?”

Jack’s bottom lip quivers, and he looks away.

“No, you’re not. Which is why you need to let her go. It’s not too late, Jack.” For a moment, the only sound is the choppy helicopter blades and the quiet footfalls as Tommy carefully creeps closer.

Jack’s arm tightens around her midsection, tugging her closer. “I don’t think I can do that. Tommy, she... she betrayed me. She was my entire world. My best friend, my reason for being... alive and she—” he turns his head away as his LED dips back into an angry red. “It’s like she doesn’t even care,” he finishes, voice crackling.

Tommy frowns, eyebrows furrowed in something resembling concern. “You have to know that isn’t true. Deep down, you know it isn’t. She’s just a child. She has no say in the matters of her parents.” He watches as the words slowly process on Jack’s face and continues his

slow crawl towards them. He's not far, now. There are only about ten feet between them. With so little space separating them, Tommy lowers his voice to something more personal rather than the raised yell he was doing earlier. "Listen, I know it's not your fault. These emotions that you're feeling... you were never built to handle them. It must be so overwhelming."

Jack nods desperately, clinging onto his words like they're a preserver in the middle of a hurricane. As if Tommy's the only one keeping him afloat. He imagines that must be what it feels like; lost in a storm with wave after wave of 'emotions' and unreasonableness crashing over him. Unable to rear his head above the water, choking on a lungful of salt.

"No, it's—it's not my fault," he agrees breathlessly.

Probability of Success: 97%[^]

Another helicopter circles lower, wind whipping at their clothes. Although Jack pays it no mind, eyes locked onto Tommy's face, sharp and assessing, Tommy tenses a little. The helicopters are there mostly as a preventative measure. They're there to ensure that Clementine lives and that Jack is quickly taken out before he can do any more damage.

But as Tommy considers Jack in a similar fashion, he doesn't think he's that much of a threat. Of course, deviants are unpredictable, and Tommy is, unfortunately, fallible. His judgement and success calculator could be wrong; his code can be filled with mistakes.

He is but an imperfect creation with imperfect creators. But, Jack's LED is flickering between yellow and the serene blue of normalcy, and his face is... not quite trusting, but hopeful. He wants to trust Tommy.

So Tommy makes a decision. With a glance at the helicopters surrounding the building and their swirling blades that are nothing but a continuous black blur, he raises his arm and gives the signal. One of the men inside watches them carefully, but gives a hesitant nod of acknowledgment. The effect is immediate, and the helicopters disappear with sight. With them goes the noise, that unsteady beat that formed a thumping pressure inside his control center, and the night becomes quiet.

"Better?" Tommy asks, an ultimately needless question considering Jack showed no issue with them before. Either way, Jack nods and slowly relaxes his grip on the gun. If Tommy wanted to, he could probably rip the gun out of his hand before he got a shot off.

Still, Tommy does not move, hands raised in a non-threatening manner. He musters up his best and, hopefully, most reassuring smile yet. "We can be on this roof all night, negotiating back and forth, but, ultimately, it comes down to trust. You have to trust me, Jack. Trust that I'm true to my word, and that this situation can be resolved in a way that benefits both of you." Face still scrunched in uncertainty, Jack shifts from foot to foot—a horribly tense few moments where Clementine squeezes her eyes shut. "All you have to do is let her go, and I promise you—" Tommy pauses, letting Jack's darting eyes find his. "I promise you. Everything will be fine."

Jack gnaws on his lip, apparently a little too hard. Thirium beads on his skin, staining it a deep blue. “I want everyone to leave,” he says eventually, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. His words are instilled with a confidence he clearly doesn’t feel, and his unsure body language betrays his anxiety. “And... I want a car. When I’m safe outside of the city, I’ll let her go.”

Tommy frowns and shakes his head. While denying Jack gives him no metaphorical pleasure, there’s absolutely no way he’s accepting that deal. Jack must know that, even in his irrational state. “That’s impossible. I’m sure you must realize that.” Jack frowns, and the lowered gun twitches. “But, if you let her go right now, I guarantee no harm will come to you.” Jack will be taken into custody and interrogated as researchers look for any errors in his code. But he won’t be hurt.

Cyberlife needs deviants alive, after all.

Several emotions flicker over Jack’s face, all too quick to be properly identified. “I don’t want to die,” he says, sounding small and insignificant. His shoulders hunch over slightly as he curls in on himself.

That unusual feeling—that is quickly becoming familiar—jolts in his chest cavity. Again, no warnings pop up in his vision.

Tommy smiles, something smaller and infinitely kind. It doesn’t feel programmed. “You’re not going to die. We’re just going to talk,” he assures.

“Promise?”

The words, surprisingly childish, hang in the air for a daunting moment.

“I promise.”

Jack swallows, though around what he can’t say—androids of his make don’t need to produce saliva. He nods. “Okay. I trust you.”

Ever so slowly, he lowers Clementine to the ground. Once her feet firmly touch the concrete, he lets go. Every eye watches in a tense moment as she stumbles forward on uncertain legs and collapses next to the pool. Tommy lets out a breath of relief. At least he has accomplished something.

With another smile, Tommy extends his hand forward, crossing the narrow gap between them. Jack glances between his hand and his eyes. Hesitantly, he reaches out.

The jarring sound of a gunshot splits the quiet night. Thirium, warm and viscous, sprays across his outstretched arm from a new, gaping wound on Jack’s side. The unexpected bullet had torn right through his trunk, taking with it a massive chunk. All that’s left behind is a gaping blue wound through which distressed, sparking wires could be seen.

Everything feels like it’s slowed down. Tommy himself feels slow, movements hindered by his shock. This wasn’t supposed to happen. Jack is supposed to be in custody. He flinches.

A second shot shatters the tense, horrifying moment. This one tears through Jack's shoulder, exposing the so-called bone beneath his synthetic skin—the white chassis of his body. He jolts from the force of it, his body twisting unnaturally under the assault. For a terrifying moment, it seems like the momentum will carry him right off the roof.

Tommy reaches out, fingers splayed in a desperate attempt to grab him, to stop this deactivation before it's too late, and Jack is nothing but broken plastic and spilled thirium. Jack's eyes lock onto his, enormous in his confusion and pain. Their LEDs mirror each other, a stark and alarmed red.

A third, and final, shot rings out. It catches his jaw, yet again chipping away skin to reveal a cracked hinge. Jack's head whips around, joints in his neck cracking ominously. He collapses, unsteadily, onto his knees on the narrow edge of the roof.

Tommy stands before him, useless, hands reaching out but too slow to do anything to stop this massacre. He stares now, eyes wide and jaw clenched, at Jack's pitiful form. Jack swallows again, although the movement makes a horrible noise as his broken jaw protests. "Huh, you really had me going there for a second," he says, voice cracking. Their eyes lock, although Jack's are hazy with an impending shutdown. His LED blinks, reflecting against the unusual dampness beneath his eyes.

Androids aren't capable of producing tears, he thinks faintly.

Thirium, slow and sluggish, drips down the side of his face. His expression, although slack with a neutrality that is somehow unusual on him, feels accusing. "You lied to me, Tommy."

Tommy sucks in an unnecessary breath. His words are a punch to a gut that he does not have.

"You lied to me." His voice tapers out, thick with an unnatural tone as his voice modulator shuts down.

Software Instability: ^

Tommy stares. Blank eyes stare back. Time no longer has any meaning. But he's accomplished his mission. He is no longer needed. His programming struggles to produce a reason for his prolonged stay.

With a tightness in his throat he shouldn't feel, Tommy turns on his heel and stalks past a dumbfounded Captain Sapnap.

When Tommy opens his eyes, he sees neither the city landscape from before, the interior of the car he was sat in, nor the Cyberlife headquarters they were headed to. Instead, he stands on a familiar wooden pathway facing a brick building with wide windows illuminated with warm light. Although he's been here many times before, he's never been here at night, and Tommy takes a moment to appreciate it.

An expansive sky greets him, lit up by bright stars untouched by the light pollution of the city. Many colors paint the sky from a deep, midnight blue to a royal purple. Tommy stares, head tilted to the sky.

He turns slowly on his heel, taking in the way the water of the surrounding pond laps at the worn edges of the bridge. The sound is peaceful. Soothing, almost. At his back, a full moon, large and yellow, basks the surrounding forest in pale light. There is no movement of wind or sound of crickets. Just the peace of the night.

Behind him, the door bursts open with a startling bang. Tommy whips around. Light spills from the doorway, illuminating the walkway and Tommy himself. A tall figure stands opposite him, backlit by candlelight and face obscured by shadows. Then, he spreads his arms wide. "Tommy!" Dream says, voice soft and excited.

Relationship with Dream: *Trusted* ^

Something in Tommy relaxes, and he quickly crosses the distance between them. "Hello," he greets warmly.

Dream throws an arm around his shoulders with an easy camaraderie. "You did so well tonight!"

Tommy blinks. A small smile splits his face. "I did?"

"Don't play coy. You know you did!" Dream steers him away from the peace of the night. With one last look towards the moonlit forest, Tommy lets the door slam shut behind him. The base is cozy with a spiral staircase in the center of the room leading to an upstairs that Tommy has never had the privilege of seeing. The floor is composed of this odd checkered pattern. On every windowsill, there is a flickering candle that fills the room with dim light.

"Cyberlife is very, *very* pleased with your performance," Dream says as he pulls Tommy further into the base. Something in him preens at the information; that small part of his programming that was built to take some kind of satisfaction in completing his missions. It's more of an itch, really. A desperate drive to do well and to never disappoint. Dream's hand, slowly inching its way into his hair, feels like a balm over the unusual sensations from before.

He stands a little straighter. "Well, I am Cyberlife's most advanced prototype."

Dream laughs, although there's some unidentifiable hint in it, an undertone of *something*. It makes Tommy's LED circle yellow for just a brief moment before righting itself. "Don't get too cocky, now. That was just a test drive." With a final ruffle, his hand withdraws, and Dream collapses back onto one of the many abandoned beds in the corner.

Tommy doesn't really know what this place is. There are always so many beds, a home for many, but he's only ever seen Dream here. "I know, I know. But I'm one step closer to realizing my purpose, right?"

Dream assesses him for a long moment. The blank, empty eyes of his mask stare back. Tommy shifts from foot to foot, his programming suddenly itching under his blank gaze, not unlike the blank eyes of—

Dream sits forward, hand gesturing him closer. Uncertain, Tommy closes the distance between them. Dream gestures again, and he leans down. “Listen, technically—technically, I’m not supposed to tell you this but…” he pauses for dramatic effect. Although Tommy’s never seen Dream’s face, he can clearly picture a sharp grin. “They’ve been talking about putting you into the field soon.”

Tommy grins. “Yeah?”

“Yeah! Like I said, they’re really pleased with your abilities. Now, they didn’t tell me this, but I think they’ll try and get you out there after a few more tests, just to make sure you’re ready.”

“I’m ready,” Tommy says immediately. Dream lightly cuffs him over the top of his head.

“You’re not ready until they say you’re ready.” There’s a serious note to his voice, one that is completely at odds with his joking tone from before. Dream is just like that, always bouncing from one emotional state to the next. He’s very hard to keep up with. Tommy nods, equally as serious. “But you’re doing good. Keep up the good work.”

In his mouth, the words feel like both a command and a threat. Luckily for Dream, Tommy is very good at following commands.

“I won’t let you down, Dream.”

Dream stands up, hand finding its way back into his now tangled curls. The motion is just shy of, for lack of a better word, painful as his fingers catch on knotted hairs. Tommy revels in it all the same. “I know you won’t. I’m so proud of you.”

Tommy smiles. He is Cyberlife’s best creation.

And he will *never* let Dream down.

the mighty have fallen

Chapter Summary

Enter the Depressed Detective (and co)

Chapter Two: The Mighty Have Fallen

It's gruesome.

Even to someone like Techno, who's been working on the force for roughly four years now and has truly seen it all, the sight is sickening. A young woman who couldn't be older than twenty-one lies dead in a bathtub, naked body bloated from the long-gone water and the ugly touch of death. Her throat is swollen, covered in dark, blotchy bruises in the nauseating shape of hands. It's a well developed bruise, so much so that they can make out the shape of individual fingers.

Techno doesn't even want to think about how long her murderer would've had to squeeze her throat for the marks to appear so starkly. Long after she stopped struggling, that's for sure.

The bathroom is filled with a flurry of activity. Cops run to and fro, squeezing to fit through the narrow door. Faintly, Techno processes the quiet sound of a shutter. The photographer flits around the room, crouching low to the ground to capture the necessary photos. It's a vital job, but Techno wishes this particular photographer wouldn't look so pleased with his work.

He jolts when a passerby bumps into his shoulder, his body swinging with the momentum. It's a morbid thought, but Techno wishes that the murderer could've chosen a better spot. A tiny bathroom in a one bedroom apartment is too cramped to host the entire precinct and their mother. With a scowl, he takes a few steps forward to avoid the traffic.

Homicide isn't even his department. It was, for a brief time, but Techno decided that mangled bodies and the nightmares they inspired simply weren't worth it. Narcotics was much more his speed. Sure, he saw the occasional dead body, but it wasn't even his job to analyze the corpses and figure out their grisly murders.

No, all he had to do was focus on any needles, powders, or suspicious crystals. And this bathroom is exploding with evidence.

All along the small vanity, a fine red powder coats the quartz like a layer of thick dust. It even dips into the sink, although the leaky faucet has washed some of it down the drain. The evidence continues, and a trail of small red crystals leads away from the sink toward the

occupied bathtub. The placement of them is odd. Almost uniform. The statistical chances of them falling that way are astronomically low.

"Hey." He snaps his fingers, gesturing to the photographer to come over. "Take pictures of this." He gestures to the oddly placed crystals. Although the man grumbles about it, he takes the necessary pictures so that Techno can disrupt the pattern safely.

Techno frowns and crouches down. He picks up a single crystal between gloved fingers and brings it closer to his face. If there were any doubts before, there certainly aren't now. They're dealing with red ice, a drug that popped up almost as soon as androids did. Yet another thing Cyberlife has to answer for. The creation of thirium, the so-called blood that runs through androids' supposed veins, led to the creation of red ice, the bane of Techno's existence.

Red ice hit the market running. Within months of its creation, the stuff was everywhere, filling a temporary lull in the market. The high was equivalent to cocaine, but much cheaper, as the ingredients were easier to get ahold of. The worst part of it all was the addictiveness of it—the worst out of any of the heavy narcotics—coupled with the rage and violence it inspired.

Techno scowls. Even after two years, he still hasn't managed to catch any of the big distributors, or even wind of any information about them. It's as if they're ghosts, heard but never seen.

With a sharp glance up, Techno motions to an assistant loitering nearby. "Bag this up." With a grunt, he stands up, knees cracking ominously as he does. Although the apartment is small, there are still two other rooms for him to investigate. He stills for a moment, contemplating whether to start with the living room or the kitchen.

Turning on his heel, he leaves the tiny bathroom behind. The living room isn't any better. It's small, cramped, and swarming with people. Several officers crowd together in the middle of the room in an obnoxious bunch, cutting off his route to the kitchen. They look nervous, several shifting awkwardly from foot to foot. Others have their heads ducked, speaking to each other in low tones. With a heavy sigh, he approaches the group. "Can I help any of you?" he deadpans.

One young officer jumps, whipping around. He's a squirrely looking guy with dark hair and a nervous hunch to his shoulders. "Oh, uh, no, Detective. We just—" he glances at the assorted group helplessly.

A woman steps up, hair pulled back into a tight bun at the base of her skull. She squares her shoulders and meets his gaze. "We're waiting on Lieutenant Soot, sir."

Techno frowns and swivels his wrist. It's well into the afternoon by now. Wilbur should be here.

"Well, where the hell is he?"

Wilbur wakes to a stabbing pain in his head and the shrill noise of his doorbell. He groans, eyes squeezing shut against the bright light filtering in from thin curtains. For one precious moment, silence once again fills his home, and he entertains the idea that whoever sought him out at such an ungodly hour left.

But of course, it's never that easy. The doorbell rings again, and then again, and then again, in quick succession, over and over. The noise grates on his frayed nerves, wearing down what little of him exists this early.

With another, even more pained groan, he rolls over his lumpy pile of blankets and haphazardly pushes himself up. His eyes are bleary, but his feet carry him on the familiar path toward his open bedroom door. He curses viciously when his feet catch on one of the many piles of dirty laundry crowding the floor. When was the last time he did laundry?

With a painful shake of his head that sends his vision spinning, Wilbur stumbles into the narrow hallway. It's lined with crumpled, lumpy garbage bags that he's yet to take out to the curb. In his defense, he can't take them out days before the garbage truck comes by. The last time he did that, a gang of feral raccoons that roams the neighborhood tore them up. His driveway stank for days after. So yes, the bags crowd his already narrow hall and stink up his home a little, but he just has to wait for trash day, which is...

Wilbur narrows his eyes at the nearest bag, temporarily resting his head against the wall. He doesn't know what day it is. That is... not a good sign.

His mouth feels like it's filled with cotton. He smacks his dry lips a couple times before he decides to ignore the ungodly ringing for a little longer. With a quick detour to the kitchen, he swings open the cabinets. They're almost completely empty, but, luckily, he's able to snag a glass from the very back. Carefully pushing aside the mountain of dirty dishes, he fills up his glass with tap water and drains it in one go.

"Yeah, I fucking hear you! Give me one fucking second!" Wilbur shouts and sets the glass down with a little more force than necessary. The throbbing behind his eyes subsides a little as the ringing, thankfully, stops. Smoothing his thumb along his aching brow, Wilbur makes his way through the living room and to the front door. Yanking it open in one fluid motion, he scowls. "What do you want?"

His brother stands on his porch, arms crossed over his chest and mouth set in a deep frown. Wilbur's expression relaxes a little. He can't remember how long since he last saw Techno outside of work. "Are you serious, Wil?" he demands, tone extremely unimpressed.

Wilbur frowns. "What? You're the one obnoxiously ringing my doorbell at this ungodly hour. Jesus, Tech, I have a fucking headache, and you are not helping it." Leaving the door hanging open, he disappears back into his house to fetch another glass of water and some painkillers. Techno follows, shutting the door behind him loudly.

"Ungodly hour? Wilbur, it's almost four in the afternoon."

Wilbur pauses, hand reaching for a little cabinet above the refrigerator. "...Oh."

Techno sighs loudly. Wilbur tries to ignore the disappointment that diffuses from the noise. "There was a crime scene. A young girl murdered in a bathtub. And you weren't there."

With a harsh gulp that sends the pills down his throat, Wilbur gropes at the counter where he usually plugs his phone in. His searching fingers only find the charger. "Huh, I... uh, I don't know where my phone is." Belatedly, he pats down his person and only just realizes he's wearing his clothes from the day before.

This realization is not lost on Techno, who looks disappointed but ultimately unsurprised. His brows are drawn down in concern. He doesn't say anything though, but he does take a proper look around. He is not impressed by what he sees, and Wilbur's cheeks burn.

"What?" he demands. "I haven't gotten a chance to clean recently, so sue me." Techno stares at the pile of dirty dishes crowding his sink. An uncomfortable heat expands in his chest. "It's not like I knew you were coming. You never visit me."

Techno's eyes snap to his, and a thrill of satisfaction runs through him. He clenches his jaw, but does not rise to the obvious bait. "Look, I'm not here to get into an argument." The unspoken *again* hangs in the air between them, a shimmering point of tension. "I'm here as your coworker. Because you need to do your job."

"Oh, well. I guess it's easy to forget about your brother with all your new responsibilities," he continues, as if Techno didn't say anything.

Techno stares at him, mouth twisted in a deep scowl. "Really, Wil. Are you serious?"

Wilbur squares his jaw and tilts his head up, meeting his steady gaze.

Techno raises his brows in disbelief. "You're serious," he says, incredulous. He opens his mouth but then shuts it with an audible click. With a quick shake of his head, he says, "Whatever. It doesn't matter. There's a girl dead in a bathroom, and you need to be there."

They stare at each other for a long moment, locked in some kind of battle of wills. Eventually, Wilbur looks away with a scoff. Something in him—the constant heat that simmers just beneath his skin—begs him to snap back, but he resists. "Whatever," he says shortly, arms crossed over his chest. "Fine. I'll be there."

Techno narrows his eyes at him, assessing. He relaxes minutely, as if he wasn't expecting it to be that easy. The thought makes Wilbur itch.

"Yeah, okay. Good." The air crackles with thinly veiled tension, but neither give in to anger's seductive trap. "Get changed, and we can head out."

Despite the part of him that snarls at the command, Wilbur turns to retreat back into his bedroom. He pauses, mentally considering his empty dresser and bedroom floor, crowded with his entire wardrobe. "Actually, I think I'm good," he says as he turns back around. Techno's eyes scan over his wrinkled, stained shirt with a single raised brow.

“Are you sure?”

Wilbur stiffens. “Actually, on second thought.” He pats himself down again, double checking for his missing phone. “Let me find my phone.”

In the end, his phone is resting in the bathroom sink, propped up as if his drunken self had tried to shove it in the drain. Wilbur collects it with a burning face.

The drive over is profoundly awkward.

Despite Techno’s repeated instance, Wilbur ends up driving. He’s sober, after all; the faint remnants of the splitting headache he woke up with attests to that.

The apartment is still swarming with officers, although several halt to a standstill when the duo walk in through the tiny front door. Wilbur scowls. “What are you looking at?” he snaps, and they scuttle off quickly. Techno frowns at him but thankfully doesn’t say anything. They’re both trying hard to uphold their tentative peace.

With an awkward nod of acknowledgment, Wilbur heads toward the bathroom to investigate.

Their tentative peace lasts exactly forty-five minutes.

Techno shuts the door behind them, locking them into the tiny kitchen. Despite the distraction in front of him, Wilbur can’t help but wonder what kitchen has a door. “Are you trying to embarrass me?” he hisses, thick fingers digging into Wilbur’s wrist.

Wilbur yanks his hand back, gingerly rubbing the spots where his brother gripped a little too hard. “Are you kidding me?” he scoffs. “You’re the one embarrassing me. Did you really have to drag me through the entire apartment? Couldn’t you have just—” he gestures ambiguously, even though he knows that it explains nothing. “Just kindly asked for a word in the kitchen.”

Techno pinches the bridge of his nose. It’s a move that is so essentially Phil that, for a brief moment, Wilbur is stunned, reeling back from the frightening similarity.

If Techno and he haven’t properly spoken in months, it’s been even longer for him and Phil. Even though he’s their captain, Wilbur avoids him like the plague, if only to save himself from the disappointed looks.

“You’re the one acting like—like—” he gestures to Wilbur, “— *that* . Immature and completely inappropriate.”

Wilbur snarls like some feral animal. “Stop telling me how to do my job. First, you blast my fucking ear drums off with your obnoxious ringing, practically begging me to show up. Well, I’m here. And now, you’re pulling me away, dragging me around in front of our coworkers —” his ears burn red “—and stopping me from doing any actual work.”

“I don’t know why I even bother.” Techno throws his hands up, eyes rolled to the ceiling with exasperation. “We can’t even have one conversation without you turning it into an argument.”

“Oh, yeah. Blame me, like always. It sure must be convenient.”

“Oh my god.” Techno shakes his head, turning on his heel to walk away. “We’re not getting into this again.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Techno exhales forcefully, and from the intimidating silhouette he makes, Wilbur can see how tense his shoulders are. He pauses for a long moment before giving in. He whips around, his face twisted with irritation. “You always do this! You always play the victim! Never mind it might actually be your fault, for once.”

“Oh, of course, Technoblade the golden child. Favorite son, perfect boy,” Wilbur mocks, voice pitched obnoxiously high. “Admit it, you’ve always been jealous of me.”

Techno reels back like he’s been slapped. “*Heh?*”

Wilbur crosses his arm over his chest, his smile smug. “You loved to lord your accomplishments over my head, but you’ve always hated the fact that I’m a better detective than you are.”

Techno stares at him. “Great. Now you’re delusional, too.”

He scowls, hands balling into fists. He hates when Techno uses that particular tone of voice, when he speaks so condescending. It was so prevalent in their childhood, when they were both fresh out of the foster system and desperate to prove themselves to Phil, scrambling over one another in increasingly petty competitions. “Oh, don’t use that tone with me.”

“No, you’re right. Obviously, there’s just so much to be jealous of. From the mountain of disciplinary warnings to the alcohol addiction, I just can’t choose!”

Wilbur’s eyes burn. “Shut up,” he hisses, voice poisonous.

“No, you need to hear this. You’re going to get fired, Wil. If you keep behaving like this, showing up to work hours late, drunk or hungover, snapping at every coworker, you’re going to get fired.” Wilbur scowls, turning away. “And nobody here is even going to care!” Techno gestures toward the shut door and thin walls, the only thing separating them from their coworkers who can undoubtedly hear them. “They all hate you, you know? You’ve actually managed to piss off an entire precinct.”

His face burns. “Well, at least I’ve accomplished something! Not like you, huh? How’s the red ice hunt going? Caught any of the big distributors yet? Or are people still dying because of your incompetence?”

Techno breathes in sharply, air whistling through his teeth. Wilbur blinks, wide-eyed and panting from the force of his words. He didn’t mean to say that. Well, he did. He wanted to hurt Techno but that... that felt too far. He knows that Techno continuously beats himself up over things he has no control over.

“Really, Wilbur?” His voice breaks. “Real mature. You know, for a second there, I actually thought you might act your age and be an adult about this. I guess the joke is on me for once. I suppose someone had to give you a break, huh, since your entire life is a joke now!”

Any guilt he felt evaporates, giving way to more mind-numbing anger. His nails, jagged and uneven—the work of his teeth, when he gets anxious—bite into his palms. “Well, at least jokes are funny! At least jokes don’t abandon their brother when *they need him most* in favor of a *stupid promotion*.” His throat is raw, flayed from the force of his words. He blinks rapidly, surprised to find that his vision is blurry.

Techno glares at him. “Don’t you *dare*. I *tried*. I tried to be there for you, but you pushed me away! You’re the one that keeps shoving *everyone* away!”

“Fat lot of good it did me, huh?” Wilbur sways, dramatically bringing a solemn hand to his heart. “Oh, what you must think of me. Stewing in self-pity and secluded in a filth of my own making. What a special treat this must be for you,” he spits.

Techno runs a harsh hand through his hair, making a loud noise of frustration when it gets caught in his ponytail. “Do you think I enjoy seeing you like this? That watching you self-destruct is some kind of fun game?”

Wilbur works his jaw. “I think, if you weren’t at least the tiniest bit happy, you would’ve tried harder.”

Techno stares with wide eyes and flared nostrils. His breath comes out in harsh exhales, like a boar getting ready to charge. His lips curl in a wordless snarl. “*How do you expect us to help when you don’t even care about helping yourself?*”

They both fall silent. The only sound that fills the room is their harsh panting. Wilbur watches, teeth clenched together painfully. Techno’s chest heaves, and he reaches up, heels of his palms digging into his eyes. Wilbur swallows.

“I can’t—” Techno takes a deep breath, palms angrily swiping at dry cheeks. When he finally removes his hands, his cheeks are splotchy with red. “I’m tired of caring about you.”

Wilbur’s breath catches painfully in his chest. “...What?”

Techno catches his gaze, eyes wide and red-rimmed, and holds it. “Caring about you...” he trails off, eyes darting away, tongue wetting his lips. He shakes his head. “It’s too much work.”

Wilbur freezes, eyes wide and locked on Techno's guilty face. He feels not unlike a deer caught in bright headlights, helpless and paralyzed in the face of such certain danger. He, too, can't look away from such a frightening sight.

Wilbur always prided himself on his words. As children, Wilbur was scrawny, stick-thin with malnourishment and neglect. Techno was, too, but he possessed a certain kind of strength, as well. There was something about him, tiny and frail, that refused to give up, to lay down in the face of danger even when Wilbur gave up.

When they finally found a stable home, Techno filled out quickly, gaining muscles and height immediately. He liked to joke that while Wilbur was older, he was actually the big brother. Of course, it was pretty surprising when Wilbur shot up like a beanpole after hitting puberty. But back then, when Wilbur was small and scrawny and Techno exceeded where Wilbur failed, all he had were his words.

And oh boy did he have them. With a sharp, silver tongue, he could get through anything, biting insults like sharpened knives. But now...

For the first time in ages, Wilbur Soot finds himself speechless.

"And I want to care *so badly*, Wil. But you make it so *hard*." Techno blinks, eyes visibly wet. Wilbur doesn't know when he lowered his voice to this helpless whisper, but he finds it infinitely worse than if he were shouting again. "I don't know—" his voice catches, cracking over his emotion. "—if I can do this anymore." He shakes his head again. "Not like this."

Oh.

He feels numb. Like this body is not his own, but some character on a TV screen. It would be easier that way, Wilbur thinks, if this situation were just another fight on some shitty soap opera. His eyes, blurry and unseeing, drift to some undefined point above Techno's right shoulder. He can't imagine looking him in the eyes right now. He doesn't want to see what expression they hold.

Wilbur swallows around the lump in his throat. His eyes burn. "Oh," he says at last, lest he shatter under the everlasting silence. Several seconds pass by, and he braves a look at Techno.

And in that moment, illuminated by the harsh, pale kitchen lights, hunched over himself with his arms tucked over his chest, Techno looks truly defeated. Their eyes meet, and Wilbur flinches back. "Promise me, Wilbur. Promise that you'll at least *try*," he pleads; the usual monotone of his voice is long gone, giving way to a quiet desperation.

Wilbur darts his eyes away when the intensity becomes too much. Like he thought, he doesn't like what he sees. "I—" he cuts off with a cough. Both of their voices are scratchy and hoarse with use. "I don't even know what that means. I can't promise that."

Techno reaches out, crossing the massive gap between them, their camaraderie thinned by two years of neglect and a daunting mountain of arguments looming above them. His hand catches Wilbur's wrist in a gentle hold. Wilbur forces himself to meet his fierce gaze. "Start

with showing up to work on time. Start with signing up for therapy.” He says nothing, his eyes drifting down to Techno’s clenched fingers. “Please, Wil. For me.”

With a long, shuddering sigh, his eyes slide closed. Wilbur lets Techno pull him closer. It’s not quite a hug—neither of their arms attempt to wrap around each other, not like Wilbur used to cling to him—but it’s the closest they’ve been in a long time. Techno, perpetually the shorter of the two, rests his forehead against Wilbur’s shoulder. It’s awkward, considering the difference between them is only two inches.

“Okay, Tech. I promise,” he whispers. He doesn’t know if he means it, but he wants to.

Techno’s fingers squeeze gently, comfortingly, around his arm.

It feels like hope.

It’s late into the afternoon by the time Wilbur staggers into work the next day.

He staggers past several officers, barely missing knocking into them as he passes by Techno’s desk without so much as a glance. The stench of booze follows him, clinging to his wrinkled clothes and tangled hair.

Techno watches with no expression, nothing that betrays his immense disappointment. Disappointed, but not surprised. He’s never surprised, not by Wilbur. Not anymore.

And now, as he turns away from his brother and back to the files on his desk, he never will be.

introductions and stellar first impressions

Chapter Summary

And so the story begins...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Three: Introductions and Stellar First Impressions

August 27th, 2038

3:32 PM

“Absolutely fucking not.”

It’s been exactly eleven days, sixteen hours, three minutes, and forty five seconds since his conversation with Dream after his trial mission, and just now is it coming to fruition.

Tommy stands in the center of a spacious office. It’s decorated nicely, if not old-fashioned, with a large mahogany desk sat in front of dark bookshelves lined with books and odd trinkets. As his eyes scan every shelf, he notes the numerous framed pictures, most of which include two remarkably similar looking boys.

“This—this is some sort of sick joke, right?”

On the left, a wide window, lined by pale red curtains, takes up most of the wall. Light, pale from the clouds obscuring the sun, filters in. The window allows a beautiful view of the park across from the precinct, and Tommy watches as a carrion crow—scientific name *Corvus corone*—perches on a low bush just outside the office.

“If this is because I’ve been slacking lately, I swear I can be better.”

One of his handlers, a man named George stands at his side—there’s a whole list of information that automatically pops up when Tommy glances his way, but he’s combed through it so much that he instantly dismisses it. Tucked under his arm, he carries a large, thin tablet.

Tommy watches him, for a while. His eyes trace along his jawline, where a faint hint of stubble is showing.

If Tommy had to rank his handlers, George would be at the top. He's efficient, surprisingly intolerant of nonsense and time-wasting, but he's never unkind. Tommy frowns. It might be a bit unfair to mark points off of his other handlers for their unkind treatment, since Tommy is incapable of caring one way or another. But then again, it certainly hinders their progress, which is why George is one of the best. He's neutral and hard-working.

Plus, Dream has a particular liking for him.

George's foot taps in regular, quick intervals. Tommy blinks and, after taking note of his other body language—the downward tilt to his mouth and hastily smoothened brow—makes his conclusions: George is very annoyed but still civil enough to hide it.

The source of his annoyance is probably Lieutenant Wilbur Soot Craft, his late appearance, and now the angry curses flying from his lips.

"Phil, you can't be—you aren't seriously doing this to me."

Information explodes in his vision as soon as Tommy's eyes flicker to Wilbur's face, and yet, he still remains an enigma. He's twenty-eight years old, but he looks much older. His appearance is disheveled, hair ratted, clothes messy and stained, and dark circles are prominent under sunken eyes. He reeks of alcohol, specifically of wine and vodka, which—after a quick search—is not a widely popular combination. Despite his... unprofessional appearance, his records show that he's a very accomplished officer.

Tommy's processors struggle to connect this drunken, mess of man with the youngest lieutenant in the precinct's history.

Captain Phil Craft—yes, there is relation—sighs heavily, running a hand over his tired face. "Wilbur, this isn't a punishment," he says patiently, with the thinly veiled frustration of someone dealing with a particularly petulant child. "Cyberlife has—" he pauses for a barely perceptible moment, eyes flickering over to George "—graciously offered one of their state of the art prototypes to help with any cases involving androids." Wilbur opens his mouth, likely to protest more, if his history is an indication. Phil interrupts. "And you're the only officer without a partner."

That is curious. Tommy delves back into the assorted information collected for his viewing. After a quick search, he learns that this is because of numerous behavioral issues from Wilbur in the past few years. Apparently, anybody who worked with him on a close level asked for a transfer shortly after being partnered.

Wilbur's face scrunches up, and his hands clench around the edge of the desk as he leans over it. "*Schlatt* doesn't have a partner," he spits, voice particularly venomous.

Tommy blinks, and a whole new set of information pops up. J. Schlatt is a detective in the homicide department. He started working around the same time that Wilbur did, and they were partners for many years before Schlatt eventually asked for a new partner. Shifting

through the online documents, he finds that the reason for the transfer was left blank.
Curious.

Phil sighs, and his expression betrays his exhaustion. It seems like they've had this conversion, or a very similar one, many times before. "Schlatt's helping train one of the new detectives. Quackity, I believe his name is?"

At the name, more information pops up, but Tommy dismisses it with a lazy swipe of his eyes.

"Besides, this will be good for you."

"Good for me—" Wilbur cuts himself off, face twisting in fury. Tommy can feel his LED flicker yellow as his stress levels rise. His body tenses, preparing for some kind of physical altercation, if it comes to that. He hasn't known Wilbur long enough to determine whether he's violent, or if he would attack his own father, but he steps a little closer to George just in case.

George, for his part, looks unbothered. He simply swivels his wrist to check the time.

"How can this *possibly* be good for me? Phil, you know—" his voice stutters, cracking a little with emotion "—you *know* how I feel about androids."

Tommy watches, glancing between the two. It's as if George and he aren't even there, silent and unwilling witnesses to such a personal exchange.

Something in Phil's face softens, eyes crinkling in concern. "I know. And I'm sorry. But there's no one else. It has to be you."

Wilbur scowls, deep and angry. He seems like a taut piece of string that's stretched too far, hanging on by a few frayed threads. His hands curl into shaking fists. Tommy tenses.

With an awkward cough, George waves. "I hate to interrupt, but my time here is limited, and there are several important features I need to go over," he says, tone a carefully constructed façade of politeness. With a hesitant nod of confirmation from Phil, George gestures to the android at his side.

"Hello," Tommy says, smile and tone artificially bright. "My name is Tommy, the android sent by Cyberlife." His gaze flickers between Wilbur and Phil, but, as Wilbur is occupied by fake gagging on his saccharine attitude, he focuses more on Phil.

"Tommy here is a state of the art prototype. He's one of a kind, the only android of our INN1T model. He was designed not like other police androids, but to be the first android detective," George rants, forced civility giving way to actual excitement. As well as being one of his handlers, George is also one of the programmers that created him, and it's obvious that he's proud of his work.

Tommy, whose gaze flickers between Phil and Wilbur's reactions, notices the way Wilbur tenses at that.

“He’s capable of finding evidence, analyzing substances in real time, and reconstructing crime scenes.”

Phil raises his eyebrows. “He can analyze substances in real time?” He glances at Tommy, eyes appraising him with a new glint. “That’s… impressive,” he begrudgingly admits.

Wilbur, however, looks far from impressed. He glares at Tommy with suspicion. “How does it do it?”

Tommy perks up. It seems like the Lieutenant might be finally warming up to the idea, if his participation in the conversation is—hopefully—an indicator. He pats his stomach. “I come equipped with a small, portable lab that can analyze almost anything. All I have to do is ingest a substance, and my programming does the rest,” he declares proudly.

“You *eat* evidence?” Wilbur’s stubborn disgust gives way to genuine surprise, brows lifted.

Tommy frowns. “As the evidence is not being digested, no. I don’t *eat* the evidence. I ingest it, analyze it, and safely store it until it can be moved to a proper holding space.”

Wilbur scoffs. “Big difference.”

It *is* a big difference. Androids don’t contain any of the necessary organs to be able to digest food, nor do they produce any digestive enzymes.

George’s gaze flickers between them, lingering on Wilbur with something like distaste. Still, he continues on as if there was never any interruption. “His social protocols are some of the most advanced yet. He’s designed with social integration in mind, and he’s able to adapt to any situation, including negotiations or interrogations.” He reaches out, a warm hand landing on Tommy’s shoulder in an affectionate clap. “He’s gone through many in-lab trials to test his performance, as well as one real life situation. He’s handled everything better than expected, with perfect efficiency.”

Phil looks from Tommy to George with a frown. “Only one real life situation?”

Tommy blinks. Blank, lifeless eyes, and an exposed, bloody jaw piece flash in his mind. His LED flickers for a brief moment, but he manually overrides it before it can change to yellow. Although he’s unsure if either of them know what the colors indicate, it won’t be helpful to this discussion if they sense any instability or malfunctions.

“It was a high pressure situation,” George explains minimally, face a perfect deadpan. “I doubt he’ll have to face anything as high stakes as that.”

Almost begrudgingly, Wilbur’s harsh expression cracks, and curiosity peaks through. He refrains from asking, though Tommy suspects that’s due to his own fragile pride rather than any respect for George and his time.

“Now, for storage, we have two options—”

Tommy lets his gaze wander, pushing George’s explanation towards the back of his processor. The noise filters out, still there, but faint and ignored in favor of something else.

He lets his eyes fix on each person in the room; George, with his wild gestures and open expression, Phil, with his careful nods and his face contorted in concentration, and Wilbur, who looks like he'd rather be anywhere else. Their eyes lock for a brief second before Wilbur looks away with a scowl.

Looking around the office, he finds nothing new. Instead, he glances out the open door and out into the bullpen. It's a wide office space, littered with desks in pairs, sitting back to back. Officers fill the space, either mulling around or sitting at their desks, concentrated on work. As he does a wide, general scan, he spots exactly two people out of place.

The first is Schlatt, who is sitting at his desk like many others, but his head is up, eyes narrowed and mouth turned into a scowl as he watches the office. When he notices Tommy's watchful gaze, his expression relaxes into a sharp grin—one that feels vaguely predatory. He looks away quickly.

The second person is, after a quick facial scan, Techno Blade Craft, Wilbur's brother. He looks much different than in the many pictures scattered among Phil's office. He's hardly recognizable, glasses forgone and hair dyed a vibrant pink. He watches out of the corner of his eyes, glancing up every so often with anxiety-bitten lips. Tommy doesn't catch his eye, but he does watch him pretend to work for a few more seconds.

He returns to scanning the premise, eyes sliding over each individual desk until his eyes land on Wilbur's. It's messy, cluttered with various scraps of paper or laminated folders. Adding to the mess, Tommy spots several crumpled up wrappers, belonging to a place called Chicken Feed, and, on the corner of his desk, an old box of donuts. Propped up against the thin layer of glass separating the two desks, there's a white board littered with cut out newspaper clippings and the like. Among them, Tommy catches several anti-android slogans, such as 'we don't bleed the same color.'

Tommy frowns. Wilbur certainly wasn't kidding when he talked about his well-known feelings for androids. This certainly was going to make his job much harder.

With a distracted blink, Tommy tunes back in briefly. George hunches over Phil's desk and over his tablet. On it, several diagrams are pulled up. He gestures to them emphatically while a bemused Wilbur and a confused Phil watch.

Tommy tunes back out.

His eyes fall on Wilbur, who's looking the most relaxed since he entered the office twenty minutes ago. His mouth is even tilted upwards, denoting amusement, as he watches George. Tommy takes the time to examine him fully, ignoring the obvious features and instead focusing on his high hairline and the little calluses on his fingers. *Oh.*

He latches onto that information and focuses on his hands. Calluses such as those are caused by a stringed instrument, typically a guitar. He puts the two pieces of information together: Wilbur plays the guitar. That's important to know, if he plans on befriending him in order to work together. He tucks that piece of information away into his own file that he's compiling.

Wilbur glances up, once again catching his eye. This time, he holds it, shifting from foot to foot with a growing apprehension. “Why the fuck is it just staring like that?” he snaps, interrupting Phil and George’s quiet conversation.

George looks up, brows furrowed in frustration, and focuses on Tommy. “It’s just what he does. He’s programmed to take in a lot of information.”

Wilbur crosses his arms. “Well, it’s creepy.”

“Wilbur,” Phil scolds with a frown.

Wilbur, however, is not one to be deterred so easily. “Why does it look so young, anyway? You look like a fucking child.”

Tommy frowns, and his LED flickers yellow for a moment. “I’m not a child.”

George sighs. “His appearance was specifically designed to be unassuming, disarming, and underestimated. It’s been working out quite well, especially if your reaction is anything to go by.” This is the first time even a hint of George’s truly feelings—his carefully hidden irritation—show.

Wilbur frowns. “Yeah, well—”

“We can handle his storage,” Phil interrupts, shooting Wilbur a withering look.

George looks surprised but quickly tries to cover it with a thoughtful hum. “I have all the necessary supplies in the company van outside. I’ll make sure to deliver them before I leave today.” He clicks, tongue tapping against the roof of his mouth in thought. “Anything else... Anything else....” he mutters to himself. Then, he snaps. “Ah, yes. Maintenance.”

Wilbur rolls his eyes and crosses his arms, looking exactly like a petulant child.

George either doesn’t see him or ignores him completely. “Tommy is capable of running self diagnostics, so he’ll let someone know when he requires maintenance. When he does, either call this number,” he pauses, searching his pockets before pulling out a crumpled receipt. With a pen stolen off of Phil’s desk, he scribbles down a number. “Or contact the person who reached out to you about this partnership.”

Phil accepts the slip.

“This phone number belongs to me, and I’ll be able to handle most maintenance or delegate it to someone else if I’m busy. If he gets seriously damaged, contact Cyberlife right away. He’s very important, okay?”

Phil nods seriously. Wilbur rolls his eyes again.

“One of his handlers—mainly me, probably—will be by every now and then to check in. Mostly just with Tommy, unless otherwise specified,” he explains. “I understand that many people find Cyberlife... a little unpleasant, so we’ll try to minimize contact. Any questions before I get the stuff from my van?”

When neither Wilbur nor Phil speak up, George leaves with one more pat to Tommy's shoulder.

An uncomfortable silence takes over the room. Both occupants stare at Tommy; Phil with something akin to confusion or even curiosity, and Wilbur with blatant hostility. Still, Tommy has an incredibly complex social program for just this moment. He smiles. "It's nice to meet you, Lieutenant Soot. I look forward to our partnership."

Wilbur scoffs. "Yeah, right. *Partnership*." He scoffs again, crossing his arms over his chest. "Why'd you even agree to store it, Phil? We don't have any room in those fucking android charging stations."

Phil fixes his steady gaze on Wilbur. "He's not staying in the station." For one brief moment, Wilbur's face lights up, expression relaxing. "I want him to stay with you."

The room falls silent. Wilbur's expression is completely blank, and that, more than anything, is terrifying. "Excuse me?" he asks, tone dangerous.

Phil looks unbothered, either too used to this or uncaring of the consequences. "I want him to stay with you," he repeats, as if Wilbur simply hadn't heard him. "I think it will be good for you to have someone else in the house."

"Someone else—" Wilbur reaches up, hands digging into his hair. "Phil, that thing isn't human! It's a machine. That's—that's like saying it'll be good for me to have a fucking computer in the house! You know, most experts are trying to get people to use technology *less* often. Do you even hear how you sound right now?"

"Machine or not, androids are incredibly complex. You can't talk to a computer, Wil, but you *can* talk to an android." Phil glances between a neutral Tommy and a flabbergasted Wilbur. "If you won't talk to me or Tech, then maybe—"

"No," Wilbur cuts off, looking murderous. "I can't—you—" he makes a frustrated noise, digging his palms into his eyes.

Luckily for almost everyone involved, George has impeccable timing. Before things can escalate into a full scale argument, the door swings open, and George re-enters. Over his shoulder, the thick strap of a familiar bag rests, digging in with its weight. "Alright," he says, patting the bag with his hand. "This is everything you'll need. It includes his charging port, a few spare parts, and a load of thirium."

Wilbur stiffens, glancing up from his hands with a glare. "If you think I'll make any attempts to repair that *thing*, you're delusional."

George stares at him for a long, uncomfortable moment, expression somehow so judging in its deadpan. "That *thing*—" he says in a perfect imitation of Wilbur's inflection. "—is probably worth more than your house. But no matter, you won't have to do any repairs. Tommy is fully capable of all small-scale repairs."

Wilbur's face, twisted in his offense, is almost comical. Turning to glance at George, Tommy can see the small quirk to his lips that indicates his hidden amusement. "Ah, yes, well," Phil clears his throat, lacing his hands together on his desk. "Is that everything, then?"

George squints and sets down the bag with a heavy thump. His hands pat down his person, as if searching for any forgotten information. "Yes, I believe that's everything." He looks at Tommy, then rests a hand on his shoulder, expression somber. "Alright, Tom?"

Tommy grins, something bright and pre-programmed. Something in George's demeanor softens when he sees it. "All systems are functioning," he replies after a quick diagnostic check.

George turns back to Phil. "Thank you for your time and your participation. Call me if you have any questions, and take care of Tommy, okay? He's vital to our understanding of the deviant problem, and to solving this... crisis... before it escalates any further." With another pat to his shoulder and quick smile, George ducks out the door.

Phil fixes Wilbur with a pointed look. "I trust that you've gained a sense of importance from this conversation, and that you'll do your best to look into this problem and to work with Tommy?"

In response, Wilbur scoffs and slams the door behind him.

And then there were two.

With a tired sigh, Phil fixes his gaze onto him. "Listen... I know that this isn't your job but... do you think—could you take care of Wilbur for me?" Tommy blinks at him. "He's.... He hasn't been doing well recently, and I'm worried about him. Even though he hates androids, I truly think having someone—something—in the house that he can talk to will help. And if you could look after him as well, that would be... incredible," he pleads.

Tommy smiles apologetically. "I'm sorry, Captain. My first priority is my mission, and I'm programmed to complete it no matter what."

Phil's face falls. "Right, right, of course." He laughs—a horrible, broken sound that scrapes at his throat as it leaves. "I... it was a long shot anyway. I'm sorry to ask, but... well, I guess you wouldn't understand."

Tommy is programmed to understand many things. His LED circles yellow. "Wouldn't understand what?"

Phil shrugs. "There is a very small list of things I wouldn't do for my sons. I suppose the same can't be said of you, and that's okay."

Tommy nods. Arguing with Phil will get him nowhere. So, with a tight lipped smile, an incline of his head, and a polite goodbye—"Good afternoon, Captain,"—he shuts the door behind him and ignores the feeling of wrongness settling in his chest.

Settling in at the desk next to Wilbur's is tense and awkward, but Tommy does his best not to let the heavy atmosphere affect him. Wilbur switches between ignoring Tommy by burning holes into his computer screen and glaring at Tommy like his very existence is of great personal offence.

Which, considering how Wilbur had reacted in Phil's office and the anti-android paraphernalia littering his desk, it is.

Wilbur glances up, deep scowl etched onto his face. Their eyes meet, and Tommy smiles. "I'm glad to be working with you," he says again, just to really nail in the point.

Wilbur looks anything but impressed. "Look, just stay the fuck out of my way, don't talk to me, and don't even look at me. We'll get along just fine if you follow those simple rules, okay?"

Tommy frowns. "But we're partners. How can we work on cases together if I don't talk to you?"

"That's the whole point." He gives him a look so scathing and so deadpan, that Tommy can do nothing but stare blankly. Once he's sure that Tommy has gotten the point, he turns back to his monitor.

However, Tommy has not gotten, and will likely never, get the point. "I can use this to access our cases, right?" He points to the terminal in front of him, screen dark and inactive.

Wilbur's eyebrow twitches, but he ignores him.

Taking that for an answer, Tommy presses his hand against the terminal. His synthetic skin retracts, and the smooth, white plastic that makes up most of his body touches, bare, against the glass. The electrical receptors embedded in his body like little nerve endings light up, sending an odd tingling sensation down his arm and connecting his own system and code with the computer's.

There are two hundred and forty-three cases with android involvement, and he scans every single one of them. The information downloads into his central processor, system momentarily depressing as he deals with the influx of code. It's an overwhelming sensation, hundreds of case files processing in just a single second.

Tommy blinks as his system attempts to process it.

Most of the earlier cases—which date back to nine months ago—are very standard. A lot of them deal with older people losing their android. Occasionally, there will be a more intense case involving android theft or destruction of property.

It wasn't until a couple months ago that things started to shift.

Now, the database is flooded with cases of mysterious android disappearances, androids attacking their owners, and even involvement in a murder case. It should be unbelievable. It

would be unbelievable, if Tommy didn't know for a fact that deviancy was a very real and very serious issue. If he hadn't witnessed deviancy's terrible effects firsthand.

Out of the corner of his eye, he stares, unashamed in his secrecy, at Wilbur. The man is still grumpy, and Tommy truly can't tell if he's actually working or pretending to in an attempt to deter the android. Either way, he stares at his screen with a certain kind of an intensity.

This partnership is shaping up to be difficult. But Tommy is nothing if not determined to succeed. It's what he was built for, after all: success. His chances of befriending Wilbur are low—low enough that he refuses to even look at them, lest he get discouraged.

But he is made of metal and wires. Nothing will be able to stop him, especially not this scrawny detective.

Tommy startles out of the monotone routine he built for himself when Wilbur stretches back in his chair, arms raised wide above his head with a short yawn. His eyes follow as the detective pushes himself up with a creak. Wilbur's hands find the tattered brown coat on the back of the chair, and he slips it on. Tommy watches as he smooths out the wrinkles and pops the folded collar. Then, their eyes meet.

For a long moment, Wilbur is silent. There's no open hostility on his face, which Tommy takes as a good sign, but he still doesn't react. With a heavy sigh, his eyes slip shut. "Come on, then." He scrubs an angry hand over his face.

Tommy hops up and smooths out his own jacket, paying special attention to the tie. Despite doing little to nothing physical all day, it's loosened considerably. He follows behind when Wilbur stiffly leads him out of the office, ignoring the eyes of the other officers as they leave. A duo. Partners.

The drive to the Soot residence is quiet, although Tommy catches Wilbur's hand often reaching for the radio before aborting and hovering in the air for a few seconds. Tommy watches him closely, as he's wont to do.

Wilbur's house is a small, one-story brick house with wide windows and a narrow, gravel driveway. Up the side of the house, ivy crawls, stems digging into miniscule cracks in the foundation. The car rocks and bumps driving across gravel, but they soon pull to a stop. Wilbur steps out with a heavy sigh, slamming the car door on his way out. Tommy follows, although he closes his door with much less force.

The interior of the house is dim, even though Wilbur flicks on every light switch that he sees. It's messy, too, with dishes clogging the sink and bulging trash bags lining the back hallway. Tommy glances around, taking in the environment. The front door opens to a spacious living room connected to a kitchen-dining room combination. Directly in front of him, a stained couch with a shabby blanket thrown over the top sits opposite to a TV shoved against the wall.

Once all the lights have been turned on to his liking, Wilbur turns to face him. His shoulders sag in an indication of tiredness, although, paired with his facial expression—a mouth set firmly in a thin line, brows furrowed—it might be something more like an exhausted resignation.

“I guess... you can take the couch.”

Tommy smiles. “Thank you for the generous offer, but I don’t need a place to sleep. I won’t be an inconvenience, so I’ll sit by an outlet,” he says. He glances around, scanners seeking out the many outlets in the room. When he looks back to Wilbur, he finds that his expression has warped, changing into something much more appalled.

“No. That’s even weirder. It’s—” he sighs and runs an exhausted hand over his face again. “It’s fine. Just take the couch.”

Tommy blinks, a little unsure, but sits down on the couch like instructed. “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

“Christ, I need a drink,” Wilbur mumbles in reply, wandering away from the living room and towards the still dark kitchen.

Tommy shifts a little, bringing up his legs to tuck underneath him. The cushions are lumpy and uneven from use, and the pillows are overly stiff with disuse. The couch is too small for him, or anyone else, to lay out fully, leaving either his legs or his head hanging off.

Still, he thinks as he paws at the soft, threadbare blanket, listening to the muttered curses as Wilbur roots around in his refrigerator, *it will do just fine*.

Chapter End Notes

Happy November 16th :) I hope everyone is enjoying this most wonderful day

partners?

Chapter Summary

They're partners.... Right?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Four: Partners?

There's a slight headache pulsing behind his squeezed shut eyes, but it's nowhere near as debilitating as some of the pains Wilbur wakes up to on worse days. His memory of the yesterday is fuzzy, mixing indiscriminately with the last vestiges of the truly heinous nightmare he'd suffered through, but he must've drank less than usual. Good for him.

With a grunt, he sets about the daunting and time-consuming task of getting up. He scrubs the crust preventing his eyes from opening and blearily blinks at the pale light spilling in from his window. Raising his head up with a loud and satisfying crack of his neck, he finds himself face to face with his bedside table. On it, a fresh glass of water with a painkiller sitting innocuously next to it.

Warmth fills his body, and he smiles, privately. He knows that he's a disappointment—how could he not, what with the depression and alcoholism—but it's comforting to know that Techno still cares. That despite all the harsh words and frequent fights, his brother still cares enough to check up on him and leave little peace offerings, as he's wont to do.

Wilbur rolls his shoulders as he sits up, comforter pooling around his waist. He swallows the pill in one go and then downs the rest of the glass. It's refreshing and cool and wets his dry mouth perfectly.

For a moment, he just sits, basking in the quiet. He doesn't particularly want to get up, but the faint promise of his brother lingering in his cramped kitchen stirs something in him. He collapses back onto his mattress and lets his eyes slide shut for just a brief, glorious moment. Then, he rolls right off the mattress and catches himself at the last moment.

Wilbur shuffles out of his room, empty cup clenched in his hand and door creaking with every movement. There's the faint sound of dishes clinking, and the smell of burnt food singes, sharp and poignant, in his nose. He smiles.

As he rounds the corner, the kitchen now fully visible, he freezes.

The android turns around, hands clenched around a smoking pan. He smiles, but it's all wrong. It's too bright and artificially symmetrical. "Good morning, Lieutenant! I attempted to make you breakfast, but I, uh, ah—it seems I do not know how to cook."

Fuck.

So it wasn't a particularly odd and horrifying nightmare.

Wilbur lingers in the hallway, frozen by his disbelief and the sudden bitterness burning in the back of his throat. There was no awkward kindness in the gift left on his bedside table, just a sense of obligation. A machine attempting to get the flawed human to do his job better. The tiny pill sits like a stone in his gut.

Wilbur turns on his heel. His bedroom door slams shut behind him.

In the end, it took several hours of being huddled up in his messy bed, hunched over his phone, before he was anywhere ready to face the situation. Tommy waited patiently outside his door, only piping up with the occasional reminder that they were late for work. Still, he wasn't insistent about it, and Wilbur only emerged after the clock had long dipped into the afternoon range.

The car ride over is as awkward as the one last night. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Tommy glancing over at him every so often, trying to catch his eye.

Wilbur stares resolutely ahead.

Tommy does not get the hint. "How are you feeling, Lieutenant?"

Wilbur's lips twitch, threatening to dip down into a frown. He doesn't want to give Tommy the satisfaction or the confirmation, so he instead ignores him completely.

"I hope not too poorly," the damned android continues, completely unfazed by Wilbur's lack of participation in the conversation. "I left a pill on your nightstand for you. I hope it was enough, but it seems like it might not have, considering you didn't feel well enough to go in earlier."

The silence speaks so loud. Wilbur has no idea if Tommy isn't programmed well enough to understand the intricacies and subtle nuances of social interactions or if he's deliberately ignoring every signal he's receiving. He turns on the radio, hoping that Tommy will *finally* get the message.

But, of course, that's too much to hope for. "It's not the best start to our first official day being partners, but that's okay! I'm programmed to adapt to any situation." Distantly, Wilbur wonders what it would take to get the machine to shut up. "We'll just have to work extra hard to make up for the break. I scanned all the files we have on the deviant cases, and there are a lot. I've picked out a few promising ones that I think we can start with. I hope that's okay."

Wilbur turns up the volume.

“It’s not very healthy to start a day without eating anything. I know I didn’t make anything... edible, but it’s best to start the day with at least some food in your system.” Wilbur’s eye twitches. “Likewise, it’s good to have more than one glass before starting your day. Dehydration certainly isn’t going to make you feel better.”

By some miracle, Tommy finally falls silent. It took a while, but it seems he wasn’t lying when he claimed he could adapt to a situation. Noticing the tension in his grip, Wilbur forces his shoulders and arms to relax.

And then the pinging starts.

It's quiet at first—the soft ting of metal. Wilbur frowns, paying attention to the noise in a failed attempt to figure it out. For a terrifying moment, he's sure it's something in his car.

He only figures it out when he catches a blur of movement out of the corner of his eye. Wilbur turns his head ever so slightly and watches, with apprehension and confusion, as Tommy flicks something around in his hands.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

As soon as the words leave his mouth, Wilbur wants to scream in frustration.

Tommy brightens, apparently encouraged despite the harsh nature of his query. His fingers slow and catch the quarter out of the air. “Ah, I’m calibrating! It helps to keep my reflexes sharp, and my system functioning at optimal levels.” He settles the coin in his palm and shows it to Wilbur.

He hates to admit it, but he’s a little interested. It’s pretty rare nowadays that people carry around physical money, let alone coins. Still, he’s already given Tommy too much. “Yeah, well, it’s fucking annoying. Stop it.”

Tommy’s hands twitch around the coin, almost as if he believes Wilbur will take it away. “Oh, I’m sorry. I’ll try to save my calibrations for when you aren’t around,” he says. His tone is the same, oversaturated with fake cheer, but, after stealing a subtle glance, Wilbur can tell the differences. Compared to before, Tommy looks wilted.

A twisted sort of satisfaction fills him, and Wilbur rides that high for the rest of the trip.

“Well, look who it is!” Schlatt’s grin is sharp and wolfish, his body language languid and relaxed as he leans his hip against his own desk. Cold, dark eyes watch with sick satisfaction. Next to him, arms crossed over his chest, and expression unamused, stands a young, dark haired man with a beanie pulled low over his head—Quackity, if Phil’s words from yesterday are to be believed.

Wilbur scowls.

Schlatt has some sort of sixth sense for weakness, specifically Wilbur's. He sniffs it out like a dog, targeting and taunting Wilbur exactly when he can't handle any of his bullshit. Like today, head still pulsing from the rough awakening and body hyperaware of the android hovering over his shoulder.

“Fuck off, Schlatt.”

Schlatt's grin widens. Like a shark scenting for blood in the water, he senses Wilbur's irritation. “Hey, buddy. I heard you got yourself a... *partner*,” he pauses, eyes flickering over to Tommy, who smiles—the fool—unaware or deliberately ignoring the tension in the air. Schlatt's lips pull down into a fake pout. “Did daddy finally realize what a shitty detective you are? It's embarrassing that you need some kind of assistant to help you do your job...”

Wilbur scowls, a reluctant heat spreading across his cheeks.

Schlatt pushes off his desk, taking a wide step forward toward Tommy. They stand face to face, Schlatt peering down his nose at him. “And what kind of model are you?”

Tommy blinks at him. His face holds a neutrality that is—unfortunately—becoming quite familiar, but there's something about him that gives Wilbur the distinct impression that Tommy is deeply unimpressed. For a long moment, he doesn't answer. “My name is Tommy, the android sent by Cyberlife,” he says after too long, in that same bright tone. He smiles, and whatever odd impression Wilbur got melts like ice under the sun. “I'm a special prototype designed for investigations.”

Schlatt's brows raise. “A special prototype, huh?”

Wilbur narrows his eyes, unwillingly appraising. Just as Schlatt knows Wilbur—how to get under his skin, what venomous words will hit the hardest—Wilbur knows Schlatt. He can feel the begrudging curiosity, the burning kindling of budding jealousy. He raises his own brows, scowl slowly turning into a grin.

“What? You jealous?” Wilbur, despite the ugly feeling crawling in his chest at the thought, slings an arm around Tommy's shoulders and pulls him into his side. He clenches his teeth at the revulsion shuddering through him and attempts a grin, although he has a feeling that is comes out more as baring of teeth than anything else. “Looks like they needed someone they could trust to look after their most important android. It makes sense that *you* weren't considered.” He can feel Tommy staring holes in the side of his face, but he ignores it in favor of swallowing down his bald-faced lies.

Schlatt stares at them blankly. “That's a cute little act, loverboy.” The nickname—once an affectionate moniker, now a bitter reminder of what they once were—stings. “But honestly, your acting skills are worse than your detective skills.”

Wilbur barely resists the urge to reel back in offense. *Hey*. He's a pretty fucking good actor. Yes, this might not be his best performance, due to his inability to separate himself from his dislike for android but still... “If that makes you feel better, then sure.” He shrugs

nonchalantly, then glances toward Quackity. “Quackity, right?” The man nods, a little unsure. “Wilbur.” He sticks his hand out, grinning faintly when it’s shaken. “Dude, I’m so sorry you’re stuck with this asshole. Please, don’t feel like you’re chained to him for life.”

Quackity cracks an unsure smile. “Nah, man. He’s been tolerable so far.” He makes an exaggerated show of crossing his fingers. Schlatt huffs, but the corners of his mouth are tilted up. The sight hurts. “So, what’s the story here? You two used to date or something?” Wilbur chokes, coughing weakly. “Cause you’re giving off strong ex-boyfriend vibes.”

“What— No, no, no. Absolutely fucking not.”

Schlatt raises a brow. “You might’ve underdone your answer there. Careful, or he might still think you have such burning feelings for me,” he says, tone thick with a sardonic drawl.

“God, would you just fuck off?” Wilbur snaps. “You’re irritating on a good day.”

He spreads his arms wide. “I live to please.”

“You’ve never pleased anyone or anything a day in your life.”

For a moment, they just stare, locked in a silent—and pointless—battle of wills.

Tommy glances between them. “This has been an odd... pissing contest,” he says, unsure; the words are foreign in his mouth. “I’m not sure I understand it. But, if you’ll excuse me, there’s lots of work to be done.” Then, with a brief nod toward Quackity, of all people, he slips out from underneath Wilbur’s arm.

Quackity’s raucous laughter fills Wilbur’s burning ears, following him even after he slinks to his desk.

Once again, he can feel the burning, inquisitive gaze on the side of his face. His brows twitch—an instinctive reflex, like a horse’s tail swatting away insistent flies—but yet again, he makes no move to answer the call.

It is well into the evening by this point, and Tommy has not stopped bothering him.

Wilbur represses a heavy sigh, trapped air pressing against his lungs in a desperate bid to escape. He blinks rapidly, eyes just barely sliding into focus so he can read blurred words on a bright screen.

He doesn’t want any part of this investigation. He doesn’t want to interact with androids any more than he already has to, brushing past them in dimly lit grocery stores or receiving indulgent nods from the police droids as he waltzes into a crime scene. He doesn’t want to be a part of the solution; he would much rather watch Cyberlife crash with feral grin as he watches them burn.

He wants— Well, he knows what he wants. He's just too much of a coward to reach out and take it.

“Lieutenant—”

“What?” he hisses through clenched teeth, head lolled back to stare up at a speckled ceiling.

Tommy pauses, a brief and glorious moment of hesitation. There's something, deep in his gut, that is ugly and vicious. It is chaos incarnate, some bottomless pit inside him that longs for destruction. Some part of him reaches out, desperate fingers pulling anything he can reach with him on his pathetic, downward spiral. It grins, teeth yellow and cracked and rotted through, and hums its satisfaction whenever he strikes, making people flee and sob from his barbed words.

He revels in Tommy's hesitation, in his reluctance in the face of such disparaging hostility, momentarily forgetting that he's a machine, incapable of feeling the pain that Wilbur himself must endure.

“I mentioned it earlier, but there are several cases I've picked out. If now is a good time, we should pick one to start our investigation.” The word ‘our’ stings, a bitter itch under his skin that—no matter how hard he scratches—he can never reach.

Wilbur scowls. “Now is not a good time.”

Tommy hesitates again. “Oh? I'm sorry to bother you. What are you working on now?” He leans forward, poking his head past the clear divider. Wilbur wrenches his screen away with a harsh creak.

“None of your fucking business.”

He risks a glance, peering openly out of the corner of his eyes. Tommy presses his lips together, LED flickering yellow.

Wilbur doesn't actually know what the colors mean, content to live in blissful ignorance of anything pertaining to androids, but he has enough situational awareness to infer its meaning. Blue is the normal, a shining beacon against the temple. Yellow, at least he believes, is for processing. Red is for malfunction.

Once again, he relishes in the android's frustration.

Maybe if he's difficult enough to work with, Tommy will be assigned to someone else. Availability be damned, there's no way anyone will be able to tolerate him for this long. Maybe he'll even be assigned to a different precinct.

Wilbur perks up, grubby hands latching onto this idea with a hopeful determination so uncharacteristic of him.

“Considering you refuse to show me or even tell me what you're doing, I have no choice but to conclude that you're lying to me.”

Wilbur snorts. “What a sound conclusion,” he says, tone dripping with a lethal amount of sarcasm.

Tommy presses his lips together again and takes a deep breath. “We have several options to choose from.” He reaches out, and Wilbur watches in reluctant fascination as his skin retracts and a smooth, white hand presses against the terminal. “In this one, a young man claims that his android partner attacked him and then fled the scene. That might be a good starting point.”

Wilbur raises his brows. “An android attacking a person?” He scoffs, crossing his arms over his chest. “Yeah, that’s likely. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s lying about it to get the insurance money.”

Tommy stares at him for a long moment, blinking. “It is very likely that his android attacked him. Were you not listening during the meeting?”

Wilbur scoffs again. Of course he wasn’t listening during the damn meeting yesterday. He was too focused on what a personal betrayal it was; his chest ached, like Phil had run him through with a sword.

“More and more androids are malfunctioning. Something—we haven’t yet identified the cause—is messing with their code, resulting in system errors that can completely erase their original coding and cause massive judgment failures. We call these rogue androids deviants, because they deviate from their original coding,” he explains.

Wilbur scrunches up his face. “Okay... and?”

Tommy drums his fingers against the desk before reaching into his jacket pocket, pulling out that coin from before. Luckily, he doesn’t start that obnoxious pinging again and instead runs his thumb along the side. “An important part of their original coding is that they’re programmed to be unable to hurt humans. If this is removed...” he trails off, sharp eyes finding his.

Wilbur blinks as the realization dawns on him. “Oh, shit.”

The android nods, looking pleased with his understanding. “So, that’s something we could look into. Another promising case is this one.” He removes his hand, spinning the device around until Wilbur can see the screen. “It’s a long standing case. A string of thefts with seemingly no evidence toward any perpetrator.”

With a hum, Wilbur leans back in his chair. He can feel the familiar thrum of an unsolved case running through him; the last vestiges of fog clearing, sharpening his judgment. “What about it makes you think that an android is involved?”

The coin slides deftly between Tommy’s fingers, dancing over his knuckles. “No fingerprints. No DNA evidence. No camera footage, despite there being cameras at every single location.” He shakes his head. “A human would’ve had to slip up sometime, leaving behind some trace. An android... it’s much easier for them to avoid detection.”

“But what use does an android have for material items? Why steal?”

Tommy gestures to him excitedly, as if he hit the nail on the head. “That’s exactly what makes it so interesting! Androids don’t need money. They don’t need any of this stuff. So why steal it?” The perpetual neutrality and artificial cheer is gone. When Tommy speaks, it’s with something that sounds frighteningly similar to actual excitement. It makes him sound almost human.

Wilbur shifts in his chair, suddenly uncomfortable with Tommy’s shining gaze locked on him.

“The last one is much more simple. An android used for security in one of Cyberlife’s warehouses went missing a couple weeks ago. While there is the possibility for someone to have stolen or destroyed it, possibly in search of thirium to make red ice—” Wilbur stiffens at the mention, eyes instinctively sliding across the room. Techno is hunched over his desk, hands a blur as they fly across his keyboard. His chest aches. “There may be a chance that the android left on its own.”

The thrill of the investigation is gone, as if a pail of freezing water was poured over his head. His eyes linger on Techno for much longer than he’s comfortable with. “Okay.”

Tommy perks up, smiling brightly. “Okay? Yeah, which one did you want to investigate?”

Wilbur pulls his eyes away from Techno with a scowl. “None of them. I don’t want any part of this.”

“But—” Tommy cuts himself off, LED blinking, but not yet yellow. “Well, the situation is pretty serious. There are hundreds of cases, with more recent ones showing a frightening trend of violence. It’s important for us to get to the bottom of deviancy as quickly as we can.”

“Okay? Look, it’s not my problem. I didn’t ask to be assigned to this dumb case. Leave me out of it.” And with a note of finality, Wilbur turns back toward his computer and begins clicking at random.

In the corner of his eye, Tommy stands from his desk, circling around the desk until he stands to his immediate left. Wilbur, in a move that feels incredibly childish—even to him—swivels around until he can’t see Tommy.

With a startled gasp, the chair whips around until Tommy and he are face to face. Tommy’s hand grips the back of the chair. “What the *fuck*—”

“I am well aware you didn’t ask for this mission, but I, mistakenly, thought you could be professional,” he says, voice low and dangerous. Wilbur gapes. “I was assigned this mission, Lieutenant. I didn’t come here to wait until *you* feel like working.”

A hazy red film covers his vision, limbs shaking with barely repressed rage. Wilbur springs out of his chair, almost knocking their heads together with his speed. “Listen,” Wilbur seethes, fingers fisting into Tommy’s fine suit jacket and pulling, twisting them around until

Tommy's back collides with the thick plexiglass divider. He crowds in, so near to Tommy that his own face is bathed in the yellow, flickering light of his LED. "I thought I made myself quite clear. Stay the fuck out of my business."

Tommy blinks. His LED flickers red for a startling moment. "But Lieutenant—"

"But Lieutenant," Wilbur mocks, voice obnoxiously high and reedy in his parody. "You're programmed to obey orders, so fucking obey this one. Leave me out of whatever fucked up investigation this is. I don't care about it, and I certainly don't care about *you*. I don't want anything to do with you *machines*."

"I don't expect you to care about me." Tommy grasps at the hands pinning him. "And I'm sorry, but your orders conflict against ones of a higher priority."

Wilbur growls, teeth bared in a wordless snarl. Tension crackles between them.

"Uh... Lieutenant?"

Wilbur whips around, feeling not unlike a feral animal, foaming at the mouth with rabies. He pauses when he spots Quackity, standing awkwardly in front of his desk. "What?"

"I hate to—" His eyes flicker to Tommy, who stares back unflinchingly. "—interrupt, but some new information just came in on one of your cases. They need you to investigate right away."

Wilbur sighs. For a moment, his shaking fists tighten, pushing harder against the android. Then, with a deep breath through his nose, he lets Tommy go. "Thank you, Quackity," he says, stepping away from Tommy, but keeping their eyes locked.

Tommy, seemingly unperturbed by the encounter, smooths out the wrinkles in his suit with a blank face. Then, he smiles. It feels smug. "Well, Lieutenant? Shall we investigate?"

Wilbur stares at him for a long moment. "Fuck you," he spits, turning on his heel. He doesn't glance back, even as he recognizes the familiar patter of Tommy's footsteps following after him.

Chapter End Notes

When you start at the bottom, there's only one place to go. Unfortunately for y'all, this story is a roller coaster :)

This chapter is a little shorter than my standard and I'm not 100% happy with how it turned out, so I'm sorry for that. But on the other hand, I'm planning to write a ton over Thanksgiving break and Christmas break so y'all will get your food. I'm super excited for the rest of the story. Honestly, it starts off pretty slow, but I have a lot of shit planned. It'll be fun! >:)

Thank you for the support so far! The comments literally drive me to write quicker <3

weeds are persistent like that

Chapter Summary

Baby's first investigation :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Five: Weeds Are Persistent Like That

August 28th, 2038

8:58 PM

The couch is quickly becoming his accustomed station, body swallowed by its soft cushions. Tommy sits down and sinks into it.

The investigation had gone about as well as he could've expected.

The Cyberlife warehouse was a giant box made of slatted metal and concrete floors. It was surprisingly empty, with gaping spaces between the endless shelves, and their footsteps echoed against the tall rafters. It was dark, dimly lit by pale fluorescent lights that flickered every so often, and there were no windows to let in the soon setting sun.

Wilbur was... about as cooperative as expected, which was to say not cooperative at all. He huffed and puffed the entire time, arms crossed over his chest like a petulant child and mouth screwed up in a harsh scowl around bitter words.

They followed the employee throughout the warehouse after doing a not-so-thorough investigation of the charging ports where the android went missing from. After reviewing the security footage, which was nonexistent—not a surprise but definitely a disappointment—they interviewed the worker who filed the report and then they... just left.

The whole ordeal took about forty minutes, not including the time it took to drive there and back.

The pillow is lumpy against his back, and Tommy rolls his shoulders, attempting to get it into a position more suited for his needs.

Not one time during the investigation did Wilbur listen to Tommy's input.

With a sigh, he lets a familiar sensation wash over him. The difficulty of stubborn human beings was becoming a familiar friend, unfortunately for him.

Tommy still isn't sure if Wilbur's difficulty was a direct response to their... altercation in the station, or if he truly didn't trust Tommy's input, but it was quickly becoming tiresome. He's an efficient machine, built to accomplish two tasks: stop deviants and investigate.

And yet, Wilbur dominated the crime scene, harshly steering Tommy away from doing any proper investigation.

Clumsy fingers find the coin in his pocket, and Tommy relishes in the cool metal. He finds himself seeking out his coin more and more often—possibly an instinctive response due to frequent raised stress levels, although he has no idea why a coin helps lower them.

His system reels, disoriented by the lack of an answer. It must be because it gives him something to focus on rather than the stressor. It also acts as a sort of alleviation for his system, he decides as he slides the coin between his fingers.

To his left and out of his immediate line of sight, he hears Wilbur shuffling around in the kitchen. He grumbles angrily under his breath, socked feet kicking away the swarming trash bags cluttering every available surface.

Relationship with Wilbur: Hostile ^v

He barely resists the urge to sigh. Yep, that's about right.

Tommy blinks, system struggling with the lack of.... well, anything. The lack of stimulus, the lack of investigation, the lack of movement. He lets himself sink further into the plush couch, blank eyes staring at a black TV screen. Distantly, ever so faintly, he wonders what Wilbur would do if he flicked on the TV.

His system quickly corrects that line of thought. It doesn't matter what Wilbur would do, since Tommy himself would never do that. It's unproductive, a waste of precious time he could be using to do... literally anything else.

Wilbur curses particularly viciously. The sound is accompanied by the clinking of bottles, and then the startling 'pop' of a cork slipping out of a bottle. This time, Tommy doesn't manage to repress his sigh.

His body thrums, restless. A familiar itch—the insistent need to prove himself useful, to be productive—prickles under his skin.

But there's nothing for him to do; there's no investigation to dig into, certainly not any that Wilbur would allow his help with. And so, he finds himself at a stand still.

Literally.

His coin stops dead in its nimble dance, precariously perched between his index and middle finger.

Well, he could always make a report to Cyberlife. That certainly would fill the time and be productive.

Having settled on that, he sits back, head bracketed by lumpy cushions, and lets his eyes slide close as he mentally reaches out for that particular space.

When he opens his eyes next, he's greeted with the sight of the setting sun. Golden light reflects off of gentle waves, casting the surrounding forest in a burning glow. His feet don't move, keeping him locked in place as he watches the fiery leaves wave sway in the soft breeze.

It's still summer, and the weather shows it. The dying heat of a sunbaked day, and the lingering smell of something so distinctly summer... He inhales, taking it all in, before he turns away from the call of the forest. The house sits there, windows glazed with the golden glare. Unlike last time, the doors don't bust open with excitement.

He crosses the short distance and pulls open the door. The house is the same; a comfortable, dusty smell of long forgotten homes, and a warm furnace still crackling away in the corner. But the room is empty. "Dream?" he calls out cautiously, light footsteps carrying him around the first floor. His eyes linger on the plethora of beds, now meticulously made with smoothed sheets.

"Dream?" he tries again, this time a little louder. He stops before the spiral staircase, leaning forward to peer up into the dark abyss. There's nothing; no far light for him to see anything, no movement, nothing. For a long moment, he does nothing but stare into its distant depth, a temptress in its own right, filling him with unquenchable curiosity.

Tommy glances side to side. Then, he sets his foot down on the first step and holds his breath.

It feels like something should've happened. Maybe Dream should've peeled out of wherever he hid himself, righteous fury spewing from spit-slick lips. Maybe he should've combusted on the spot, some odd code stopping him from even thinking about disobeying Dream's orders. Maybe the stairs should've retracted at the slightest touch.

Nothing happens.

Tommy doesn't know what to make of that.

He pulls his foot away slowly. It's a danger for him to touch it, but not a very quick one. It's unlike a burning fire, desperate hands pulling away from the quick inferno. No, it's a much slower, much more covert danger. Like quick sand, enough pressure would've made it sink and sink until he couldn't go back, couldn't escape the consequences of his own actions.

If Dream was here, he would've come out by now.

Without a last glance at the second floor, he walks out the nearest door. He wanders the intricate pathways, the bridges that cross over the water and lead to a myriad of locations, very few that Tommy has actually seen.

He weaves along crossing paths, circling the building until he comes across an expansive plot of dirt, surrounded by worn wooden planks and supported by thick logs reaching far into the depths of the pond.

There, on one of the pathways next to the large plot, is Dream. He's crouched, knees pressed against the soggy wood and bent over the tilled dirt. His signature green hoodie is absent, forgone in favor of a plain black shirt. His hands are outstretched, fingers and palms sunken into the earth; his wrists and forearms are stained with dirt.

He doesn't seem to realize Tommy is there yet, and so, Tommy stands, observing him with a soft smile.

It isn't often Tommy gets to see him like this, peaceful and so plainly himself. His mask is pushed up just the faintest bit, revealing his chin and the bottom part of his mouth. His lips seem to be tilted into a smile as his hands twist, pulling out a weed with tangled roots.

There's a small basket placed next to him. It's filled with little jars of seeds and the remains of other weeds, torn up from the ground.

Dream glances up at Tommy's approach, and the dying light glints off his mask. "Oh, Tommy," he says mildly, dropping the latest weed to join its uprooted brethren. "There you are. I was expecting a report from you soon." He sits back on his heels, hands brushing together harshly, sending a spray of particles. Even after a thorough cleaning, dirt still clings to his skin. "Come on, sit down." He pats a spot next to him on the docks.

Tommy sits, thighs pressed against the wood. His legs dangle over the side, shoes brushing the surface of the water and sending gentle ripples throughout the pond. A few curious fish swim near, and Tommy watches as they nibble at his shoes. "Hello, Dream," he greets, albeit belatedly.

"Hello, Tommy," he mimics, soft tone betraying his amusement. "So, you've officially joined a precinct. How is that going?"

It's odd. Tommy knows for a fact that Dream has access to all of his memories, and yet, it's commonplace for him to ask Tommy about them. Distantly, he wonders if it's some kind of test.

"It's... complicated," he settles on, leaning back until his hands meet the rough wood. "On one hand, I'm thankful to be out in the field and fulfilling my purpose. On the other..." he trails off, teeth sinking into his bottom lip. "It's going to be a lot more difficult than anticipated."

"Oh?" he prompts carefully.

“Not many in the precinct take the deviant problem seriously. I suppose this is logical, considering very few of them have seen it first-hand. But it’s not a high priority. Not even to the partner I’ve been assigned to.”

For a moment, Tommy can see Dream’s lips press together into a firm line. But the next moment, the expression is gone, replaced with a relaxed neutrality. “Yes, I imagine that will cause a lot of problems. They’ll learn, with time. As for the rest, you’ll just have to make them understand.”

Tommy hums. He tilts his head back, basking in the warmth of the rays. “I suppose I will. It certainly seems like a waste of time, though.”

Dream allows this with an incline of his head. “Probably. But, unfortunately, it’s important that we work with them on this. The deviancy problem cannot be allowed to spread.” A harsh silence falls over them, momentarily disrupting the quiet peace from before. Even the fish seem to have disappeared under the intensity of his voice. “What else?”

Tommy scratches his nails into the water-softened wood, carving away little pieces of the bridge. He makes no move to answer.

“Tommy.”

“My partner and I investigated a case,” he says instead of the thousand other thoughts brewing in his mind. “An android suddenly went missing from one of Cyberlife’s warehouses. I thought it was a good launching point.”

He can distantly feel Dream’s gaze on the side of his face, burning in its consuming heat, even through the ceramic mask. The difference between it and the tender caress of the summer sun is startling. “That’s good. What did you find?”

Tommy thinks of the grainy security footage, suddenly cutting out at the moment it was most needed. He thinks of the attitude of the worker, completely unfazed in the face of their lost property. He thinks of the new lead, a single, mangled arm in a field not too far from the warehouse, its jagged edges coated in splotches of dried thirium.

Wilbur thinks that it’s somebody breaking into Cyberlife warehouses in search of thirium.

Tommy isn’t so sure.

“There wasn’t much evidence. The cameras were disabled at about 3:45 AM and when they turned on eleven minutes later, the android was gone. The android was a standard GJ500 model, designed for private security purposes. After analyzing the video feed, there was nothing out of place except for the missing android. Nothing was amiss before the video cut out, either. The weather that night was cloudy, but there was no storm or adverse weather to mess with the power,” he recites, immersing himself in the details of the case.

Dream nods and reaches into the basket. With a quiet pop, the lid of one of the jars slides away. Dirty fingers scrabble at the glass, scooping out little portions of seeds.

“An interview with the worker who initially reported the disappearance proved to be relatively unproductive. He apparently reported the incident several days after its occurrence, which certainly wasn’t conducive to the investigation, and he said that he didn’t notice anything weird. Not in the environment nor with the android’s recent behavior.”

Dream leans forward, hands bracing himself on the wooden planks surrounding the field. He extends his hand out as far as he can, and then he sprinkles the seeds across the dirt evenly. Tommy watches with fascination as he then sweeps a hand over the top layer, covering them with dirt.

“As for the last piece of evidence... It’s the most important. A mangled android arm found in a field not too far from the warehouse. The point of... amputation, for lack of a better word, was jagged, looking like an uneven job accomplished by a dull blade of some kind. After analyzing the arm, it was a match to the serial code of the missing android.”

“And what do you make of all that?”

Tommy presses his lips into a thin line. “Lieutenant Soot believes that someone, or a group of people, broke into the warehouse to steal thirium. Upon breaking in, they were discovered by the missing android and attacked it in a fit of panic. Now unsettled and with a destroyed android, they ran away before they took anything and disposed of the android.”

“I didn’t ask what Lieutenant Soot thought. I asked what you thought.”

Tommy flinches. His LED spins yellow for a brief flicker. “I don’t think the evidence lines up,” he answers hastily. “Besides, it’s a lot of assumptions going off of very little evidence. Nothing about the situation could possibly explain the motive of the criminals, if there are any. If they destroyed the android, then why was the arm meticulously cut off by some kind of blunt knife. It would’ve taken a good amount of time to cut it off.”

Beneath the mask, Tommy spots a pleased grin.

“Not to mention the cameras are only out for eleven minutes, meaning they would’ve had to disable the cameras, break in, be accosted by the android, destroy it, and then leave all in the span of eleven minutes. It’s possible but statistically unlikely. In my analysis of the camera footage and in the code of the security systems, there were no anomalies consistent with most hacking methods. But if the perpetrator already had access to the system...”

Dream leans forward, head turned to Tommy. “You think it was an inside job.”

“I think the android deviated at some point and took this opportunity to escape. I think that, since it was a security model with an established connection to the surveillance system, it hacked the cameras, shutting them down for the time it needed to escape. It would explain why nothing was out of place and why there were no traces of hacking.”

"And what of the arm?"

"The arm..." Tommy trails off, the corner of his lips tilting up. "I think—" His eyes flicker to Dream, watching for any sign of disapproval. "I think that the android cut it off itself, to

make it appear as if something truly terrible happened. I think it was hoping that anyone who found the arm would simply assume someone destroyed it and dropped any further investigation."

Dream hums noncommittally. There's a terrible swoop in his gut. "But why would the android deviate?"

"That's what I need to figure out. Although, we still don't understand everything about deviancy. Does deviancy need a trigger? Or is it a matter of time? Probably not, considering that older models don't seem more statistically inclined to deviate. So maybe it's something being produced in the code of new models," he mutters, chewing on his lip until the taste of thirium explodes over his taste buds.

Dream watches him closely. "And have you explained this to... Lieutenant Soot?"

Tommy nearly huffs, rolling his eyes. "He refused to listen to me. He didn't take any of my input or suggestions, and he actively ignored me at some points. He completely dominated the entire investigation, and he didn't even do a proper, thorough investigation."

Dream hums again, but doesn't say anything. He reaches out, fingers gripping another small jar, and he shakes it. Tommy watches as the seeds rattle about in their container. "Have you ever gardened before?" Dream asks suddenly.

Tommy blinks, directing his gaze away from the jar and toward the expansive field. There's still so much untilled, untouched dirt left. "No."

"No, of course not." Dream shakes his head. "Would you like to try? It's very simple."

For a moment, Tommy just observes Dream. Attempting to get a read on him is useless—he has yet to master the intricacies of Dream's elusive body language—and yet he still tries. "Sure," he answers, pushing himself up until he's standing.

Dream leads him away from the intersecting pathways, toward the rest of the plot. He settles further down, crouching low over the ground. Tommy follows suit. "First, you need to uproot all the weeds. You can use this—" he roots around in the weed-filled basket until he produces a trowel. "But make sure you get all of the roots. If you leave even a tiny bit in there, they can grow back. Weeds are persistent like that."

Tommy nods and accepts the offered tool. He turns to the field of weeds. They sway slightly in the wind, leaves basking in the golden sun.

It's unfair, he can't help but think, that the weeds get torn up in favor of other plants. What makes them so undesirable? Is it because they have nothing to offer, no fruit or vegetable or herb or beauty? Why must they be uprooted when they were here first?

At Dream's prompting cough, Tommy leans forward. He digs the point of the trowel into the dirt and tries to ignore the odd sensation in his chest as he uproots a cluster of dandelions.

"What do you make of this... Lieutenant Soot?"

Tommy considers this, hands stilling in their motion. He's certainly challenging. Bitter and angry and terribly sad. His home is a mess, cluttered with dirty dishes and strewn with trash bags. Clothes piled on the floor trail out of Wilbur's room like breadcrumbs, helping him find his way back.

And then there's Wilbur himself. Gaunt skin, heavy bags, bloodshot eyes, unwashed hair. There was potential in him, once. A great skill that propelled him through the ranks. And Tommy can still see that spark, even if Wilbur tried to extinguish it.

"I think... he's interesting," he answers after too long. "I think he was once an incredible detective and, although he seems to have lost his way, he still holds a sharp mind. It will be a challenge getting him to use it, but I believe he will be a valuable asset to the case." His hands dig in the ground, dirt burying itself underneath his fingernails. Probing fingers search, reaching out for the ripped ends of roots that remained embedded.

"What do you think is the best approach?"

Tommy barely resists the urge to bite into his lip again, still raw with newly healed skin. "I think, if I form a friendly relationship with him and gain his trust, he will become much more compliant."

For just a moment, Dream's lips twist in a scowl. Tommy blinks, LED flickering red, but the expression is gone the next moment.

Dream shifts, leaning forward to join him. He doesn't have a trowel, but his rough hands expertly dig into the dirt and pull up the weeds in one go. Tommy watches in fascination. "What do you know about him?"

"Not much. He started working at the precinct when he was nineteen, got promoted to detective at twenty-two, and then got promoted to Lieutenant at twenty-six, a very impressive feat. His father, Phil, is his captain, and his brother, Techno, is a fellow detective."

Tommy narrows his eyes, hands reaching for a particularly stubborn weed with roots deep in the earth. It's covered in little thistles that dig into his skin. Thirium beads on his skin.

"What else?" Dream prompts when Tommy doesn't continue.

"Lieutenant Soot seems to believe that his father is out to spite him. There seems to be some bad blood there, if the way they argued when I first was instated is any indication. He has several disciplinary warnings and already got into a verbal altercation with another coworker, although the coworker *did* instigate it," he says, dirt-stained fingers gently prodding at the now closed wounds. The thirium smears against his palm.

Tommy glances up, watching as Dream sits, stationary, with a weed clenched in his fist. "What do *you* think?"

Dream considers this with a tilted head. "I think... that he's going to be a thorn in our sides." This puts him back in motion, depositing the weed into the basket before returning to the dirt.

“He already proved himself inefficient. He doesn’t value this mission, and he doesn’t value his own time. Don’t expect too much out of him.”

His words sit, unstable, in his gut. Tommy thinks of Wilbur, his too-tall frame hunched over and his bitter eyes. He thinks of Phil and his pleas, desperation so great he would turn to an android for help.

No, that doesn’t sit right with him at all.

“I think working with a detective with... personal issues... is an added challenge. But I’m programmed well, and I’ll adapt as needed.”

Dream presses his lips together into a displeased line. “That’s fine,” he says, although his tone indicates that he does not, in fact, think that it’s fine. “Just don’t let him distract you from your mission.”

“Never,” Tommy agrees vehemently.

The two fall silent, working in companionable silence. They’ve made some progress, clearing away a good portion of the plot. The dirt looks so sad and exposed, robbed of its leafy companions.

“It was always... unavoidable,” Dream says after the sun begins to dip beneath the horizon. The sky is illuminated, painted with pastel colors and the last remnants of sunlight. “Humans won’t trust you, because you’re an android, and they won’t believe in your abilities or your competency.” Dream reaches out, hand cupping his face. Tommy leans into the action, eyes fluttering closed. “You’re incredibly useful, Tommy. But to them, you’ll have to work hard to prove it.” His thumb swipes at his cheek, wiping away some stray dirt. “Can you do that?”

Tommy smiles. His system hums with satisfaction. “I can do it.”

Dream smiles back; his hand pats Tommy’s cheek. “Good.”

When Tommy opens his eyes, he’s greeted with the blank TV and a dark living room once again. All the lights are shut off; the kitchen is silent and empty. The only light comes from the crack underneath Wilbur’s door, where dim lamp light illuminates.

He misses the sun. Here, in the dark, it feels cold.

Tommy sits up, stretching his arms up above his head. His body is limber and ready to go, but it always stiffens up just slightly after he makes his reports. His eyes catch on his hands, smooth and clean and spotless. His thumb traces the even line of his nails. There’s no dirt underneath.

Well, it doesn’t matter. He has work to do.

Chapter End Notes

Can you tell I don't know what the fuck I'm talking about? Because if you can... shushhhhh. It's called ✨ Suspension of Disbelief ✨ for a reason

growing pains

Chapter Summary

It's hard to adjust to a new roommate sometimes. And Wilbur's not very good with change...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Six: Growing Pains

Wilbur blinks. His eyes must still be bleary, vision blurred with sleep. He rubs at his eyes aggressively, knuckles digging into closed lids with a fury. When he opens his eyes again, the scene doesn't change.

The change wasn't that noticeable, at first. His living room has always been the cleanest out of the entire house; it's the least used, a room meant for gathering with no one to lounge in it anymore. Wilbur stays away from its saggy couch, opting instead to curl up in his messy bed, staring at a laptop screen much too close to his face.

Looking back, the fact that he didn't trip over any obnoxious garbage bags on his journey through the hallway should've been a red flag. Those fucking things were *everywhere*, and, still drunk on sleep, he didn't exactly walk a straight line.

Wilbur surveys his home with a critical, if not still sleepy, eye. When he turns to face the kitchen, he gasps out loud.

His sink is empty.

The fucking sink is *empty*.

Stumbling over his own two feet like a newborn calf on unsteady legs, he hunches over the sink like a madman.

There are no dirty dishes crowding the sink, rendering it unusable. In fact, the sink has been scrubbed clean, basin spotless and shining in the pale morning light. He blinks, uncomprehending, and reaches out hesitantly. His fingers trace the smooth base; when he pulls them away, they aren't even wet with any remaining and unpleasant residue.

"*What the fuck,*" he whispers, breathless, to himself.

His hands wander, fingers dancing along the marble countertops. They're silky smooth; the long stuck on food residue is gone.

Wilbur gapes.

Frantic hands reach up to the cabinets, pulling them open with, probably, too much force. Inside, stacks of clean dishes sit, waiting to be used. He nearly gasps again; he can't remember the last time all his dishes were clean. Months ago, probably.

Somewhere behind him, a door opens with a quiet creak. "Oh, good morning!"

Tommy's voice is still annoyingly peppy, especially for how early it is (2:31 PM isn't early, but it's the earliest awakening in some time). Wilbur slides a calloused hand over a disbelieving face and turns around.

Tommy's suit jacket is gone, draped across the back of the couch like an expensive blanket. His tie joins it, leaving the collar of his white button-up loose and open. His long sleeves are rolled up, revealing pale forearms dripping with soapy water.

"What the fuck?"

Tommy smiles. "Do you like it?"

"What the *fuck*?" he repeats, feeling very much like a broken record.

"I decided to forgo stasis last night, since I realized I could be much more productive. I started with the kitchen, since I figured that was the most important. All the dishes have been properly sanitized and put away. Plus, I cleaned out all the rotten food from your refrigerator," he explains, brushing past Wilbur to dry his hands on a soft-looking dish towel. He can't even remember the last time his towels looked that fluffy.

Wilbur can only reach out, mouth open and brows raised in complete bewilderment, as he rubs the supple material between his fingers.

"I also took out all the trash bags, though I did have to scare away a few wild animals. Did you know there's a gang of feral raccoons roaming around the neighborhood?"

"... Yeah."

"Yes, well, they weren't very happy when I wouldn't let them at the bags. I ended up wasting a lot of time just sitting out there until the garbage truck came by. One of them tried to bite me!" He sounds far too chipper. If Wilbur didn't know better, he would say Tommy almost sounded excited. "Fascinating creatures."

"... Uh huh..."

"I also straightened out the living room, which was pretty quick. I debated vacuuming, but I ended up doing it, since it was pretty late into the morning by that point. You are a very deep sleeper!"

Wilbur isn't sure whether to be unsettled at the depths of his sleep or grateful that he wasn't awoken at whatever time Tommy determines is 'pretty late into the morning.' He settles on complete confusion.

Tommy takes in his silence with unease. His LED flickers yellow for a brief moment. "I just finished cleaning up the bathroom," he continues, tone halting and unsure. "I plan on returning to it at a later date, for a more... deep and thorough clean, but I made a good start."

Wilbur thinks of the blackened bathtub, dark with grime and mold rooted in every little crack, crevice, and valley. He thinks of the sink; the metal faucet eroded away, replaced with filth and crumbling rust. He doesn't even want to consider the toilet.

He almost wants to thank him. That was no easy job, and any human would've given up on cleaning it a long time ago. But then he glances at Tommy, at his pleased, self-satisfied expression, and the feeling dissipates.

"When I get time next, I'm planning to clean your room, so if you don't want to be in there while I am, plan around—"

Wilbur interrupts him with a snarl. "Stay the fuck out of my room."

Tommy blinks. His LED circles and circles and circles. "But I'm sure you would benefit from —"

"I don't care. I don't want you in my room."

Tommy watches him, expression unreadable. "Oh... okay."

"You—" he cuts himself off, massaging the bridge of his nose with a furious hand. "Why did you do this?"

Tommy brightens. "Oh! That's because I can be very *useful*, and I don't think I've done a good job of showing that in the past. It's best if we have a positive relationship, Lieutenant, and I can be helpful to you." He gestures to the general house, which is neat and spotless because of Tommy. "I know I don't know how to cook, but I can learn! I *promise* I can be useful."

Wilbur frowns. His brows furrow in... well, the expression his face twists to can't quite be called concern. Confusion, certainly. Curiosity, maybe even. He considers Tommy, feeling displaced and unsure, and he considers his words. Sugary sweet words said in a tone that is almost desperate, pleading. The way he says 'useful' makes his skin crawl. It's as if he thinks it's the most important word in the world, clinging to it with searching hands. It feels fundamentally wrong.

Wilbur shifts, unsure, between his feet. "That's—Listen, I don't care about it. I don't want you to be... *useful*, or whatever. Honestly, I'd much prefer it if you just stayed out of my way. Don't fucking touch my shit."

Tommy blinks rapidly again, and Wilbur watches as he struggles to comprehend. “If that’s what you want, Lieutenant,” he says, slowly. “But there’s still so much to clean. I haven’t even gotten to that room at the end of the hallway—”

Before he even properly registers the words, his hands are on Tommy. One fists itself in his shirt, and the other curls around his throat, pushing Tommy until he slams against the wall. The movement, forceful and aggressive, rattles through the walls, vibrations sending a few remaining pictures dropping to their doom. Glass shatters as they hit, wooden frames splintering against the ground. Wilbur curls his lips into a snarl, knuckles white and hands shaking. "Don't go near that room or I *swear*—" his tone is low and terribly dangerous, face leant in close to Tommy's "—they'll never find your disassembled parts in a dingy alley somewhere," he promises, hand tightening around his throat. The skin there starts to retract; although, whether that is in some android show of submission or because of the force put on it, he isn't sure. "Do you understand?"

Tommy's LED blinks a frantic red. One of his hands creeps up, fingers gently prying at the iron hand around his throat. "I understand, Lieutenant," he agrees in a pathetic rasp.

Wilbur reels back in surprise at the realistic change in his voice, hand automatically dropping. His other stays rooted to the spot, keeping Tommy locked in place. After another moment, he lets go and steps away.

Tommy rubs at his throat. The skin slowly but surely comes back, rippling over the affected area and once again covering his bone white body. The LED at his temple upgrades to a solid yellow and then sticks.

With a huff, Wilbur stalks out of the room. He tries to pretend he didn’t see the blue staining the wall.

“God,” Wilbur groans, face buried in his waiting palms. The harsh lights of the bathroom do nothing to eliminate the steady pulsing behind his eyes. It seems like he always has a headache, these days.

Somewhere, a toilet flushes, and a door squeaks open on rusty hinges. “Dude, are you alright?” Quackity asks, leaning over the low counter to stick his hands under the harsh spray of the faucet.

That is the question, isn’t it?

Because the short answer is that Wilbur isn’t alright.

And he hasn’t been in a long time.

Because the long answer is so long; a twisted, complex answer that not even Wilbur himself can make sense of.

He feels like everything around him is dissolving into sand, slipping through his fingers every time he attempts to hold it close. He feels disoriented, constantly confused, no longer an important agent of his own life. He doesn't remember the last decision of his that truly affected his life, let alone one he actually wanted to make. He's a slave to his feelings, a prisoner of his vices. His actions are no longer his own; they belong to some caricature of a depressed, drunken man, because that's all he is any more.

He feels like every second of every day he is at risk for breaking. Shattering into a million, tiny pieces that not even the dedicated care of his father and brother would be enough to put back together.

He feels stretched out, taut like a thin rope doing a job much too big for it, just a few seconds away from snapping and watching everything around him crash to the ground.

And yet he can't say any of that. Especially not to Quackity, an up and coming detective that he met *literally yesterday*.

But Quackity's eyes are kind, and his expression is open and sincere. He's not asking because it's the socially acceptable thing to do when you encounter a man having an almost breakdown in the precinct bathroom, hunched over the dirty sinks in faux-prayer. And that, Wilbur considers as he reluctantly lowers his hands, is a most curious thing, indeed.

So, he reconsiders.

He tucks away all the ugly, raw feelings from before that leave him feeling too exposed, even just from the thought of them. He tucks them away into some deep, dark part of his brain—where they will likely fester and grow mold—to be brought out at a later date, when he has a bottle of vodka and/or wine in his hand. And he reconsiders the question, this time with a different lens in place. One less self-pitying and more pragmatic.

He considers the most recent cause of his frustration.

That damned android.

Even his aggressive stunt from before hasn't cowed him.

(He went too far, a tiny part of him cries, abandoned and ignored in the deepest part of his brain, where he keeps the things he absolutely *cannot* think about).

It seemed, for a brief second of glorious silence, that Tommy was, for lack of a better word, afraid of him. The car ride was silent; Wilbur was still fuming in his unreasonable anger, and Tommy... Tommy sat, small and silent, with his hands in his lap and his shoulders hunched over. His LED still circled yellow, and some hair on the back of his head was clumped together with dried blue blood. Wilbur had felt tense, hands gripping the steering wheel in a too-tight grip, knuckles pale white.

Something crawls in his gut, ugly and sharp, when he thinks about Tommy being *afraid* of him. The only person—thing—to treat him semi-normally. Like he wasn't some breakable thing, made of cracked glass and too-thin thread. Like he wasn't a disaster waiting to happen,

a bomb with a too-short fuse and a penitent for playing with fire. Like he wasn't a sinking ship and the captain going down with it, a horrible, fatal spectacle that couldn't be looked away from.

He hadn't felt sympathy, he uselessly argues. He hadn't felt guilt, he desperately tries to convince himself. He hadn't felt anything at all, other than a broiling, heady anger, he cries out, even though there is no one to listen.

Tommy is just an android; he may be a realistic portrayal of humanity, but he is anything but. He is a machine, incapable of feeling emotions and, most importantly, pain. He is nothing but an impressive fake, convincing enough in his costume to rouse the dregs of empathy that, surprisingly, still remain. He just looks startlingly human sometimes, like when he curls in on himself in a pathetic attempt to make himself smaller.

But nothing Wilbur does to him *actually* has any effect.

Right?

Tommy is nothing but an unwanted house guest. An uncooperative machine. An unexpected partner.

Wilbur swallows around the bitter taste of guilt in his mouth, scraping his throat raw with its slow, destructive descent into a heavy stone in his stomach.

The yellow LED was gone by the time they reached the precinct, replaced with the typical blue and a dazzling smile. It's as if nothing even happened. The blue stubbornly clinging to his hair was gone, as well, although Wilbur had no idea where it went. Tommy never made any attempt to clean it up

And then it was business as normal.

Wilbur sat at his desk, squinting behind cracked glasses at the muddled case files Tommy sent over on their first day together. Tommy sat at the desk to the side, but his eyes were firmly fixed on Wilbur's face, hand nowhere near the terminal he was usually so glued to.

Wilbur ignored him, like he so often did, and figured that was that. Tommy was just a little unsure, his... programs, or whatever, still trying to make sense of the irregularity that was Wilbur.

But then Tommy never started work. He kept staring, fixated on Wilbur like he was some great puzzle.

When he finally cracked under the gaze burning holes on the side of his head, he turned to him, grimace on his face, but no anger could be conjured up. Tommy simultaneously brightened and shrunk in on himself under his gaze, and Wilbur...

Wilbur didn't know how to feel about that.

But then words were spilling forth, sugary and saccharine and obnoxiously bright. Tommy was offering to fill out the report for the investigation they did yesterday with an eagerness so

becoming of him.

And Wilbur let him.

Because he hated filling out investigation reports, a long and arduous process that served only to dull his mind and blur his eyes. Because Tommy offered, with an eagerness glinting in his eyes and an expressed desire to be *useful*. Because Wilbur was tired, already exhausted from fading adrenaline and some nameless, lingering emotion that left a bitter taste in his mouth.

But he let him fill out the report, and he has no idea what kind of flood gates he just opened.

“Wilbur?” Quackity prompts. He doesn’t know how long it’s been since he first spoke, how long he’s been hunched over himself, lost in an avalanche of his own thoughts. “Dude?”

Wilbur clears his throat; he’s afraid of how he’ll sound when he attempts to speak otherwise. “That fucking android is going to be the death of me,” he says gravely, running a rough hand over his tired face and relishing in the slight burn of his stubble against his palm.

Quackity laughs, light and relieved. His hand claps Wilbur’s shoulder. “Dude, you really had me going there. I thought it was something super serious.” Wilbur frowns. It is something serious, he wants to say. He doesn’t, though, and the feelings, unhappy to be shoved down again, squirm inside his chest.

He manages a smile, although the swallowed words taste like ash in his mouth, and gives Quackity a half-hearted goodbye.

The flood gates opened indeed.

After his first initial weakness, Tommy doesn't stop pressing. The next day, Tommy comes back with a steaming coffee clenched in his hand. His smile is brilliant as he gently settles the cup down. When Wilbur gives him a weary look, he nods eagerly. "You looked tired, Lieutenant. I thought you could use this."

Wilbur peers into the coffee, dark and unyielding. "I don't like black coffee," he says, simply, pushing the offending drink away from him. He refuses to look at Tommy, uncaring of whatever expression he holds. When he glances back over, both Tommy and the coffee are gone.

With a sigh, he relaxes, hands reaching out to resume their frantic typing.

But the next moment, he's back, cup still held in his hand. "I asked the captain how you like your coffee," he says instead of a greeting, setting down the cup once again. This time, it's a pale tan, lightened by the unholy amounts of cream and sugar poured into it. "I hope you enjoy." Then, without further word, he sits down at his desk and connects to the terminal.

Wilbur can only stare at the drink, hand half reaching out for it. He doesn't want to drink it—doesn't want to give Tommy the satisfaction again—but at the same time, his drooping eyelids beg for mercy. With an angry mutter, he takes the drink and gives it a careful sip.

The day after that, it's food that Tommy brings. Little snacks, carefully crafted from whatever the other officers left in the break room. After the coffee debacle, he's clearly learned. He never outright approaches Wilbur with offerings in hand. Instead, he leaves them on the corner of his desk whenever Wilbur gets up to do something.

Wilbur doesn't humor this one. He simply knocks the snacks into the small trash can next to his desk and continues on. He pretends he doesn't see the carefully blank looks Tommy sends him.

After that, Tommy fixates on his first success.

"Is there anything I can help with, Lieutenant?" he asks for the fifth time that day. It isn't even three o'clock, yet.

Wilbur sighs heavily. "For the last fucking time, no. No, there really isn't. And I'm not likely to tell you, even if there is."

Tommy frowns, and then cranes his head around to look at Wilbur's screen. He barely resists the urge to wrench his computer screen away again. "I can help with filling out reports. I know you don't like to do those."

Wilbur closes his eyes. The urge to beat his head against the desk grows and grows with each passing moment. "There are no reports to fill out," he answers instead. Thankfully, Tommy goes back to his own work.

By the end of the week, Wilbur is well and truly exhausted. His conversation with Quackity keeps coming back. There's no way he'll survive this damned android.

Wilbur hunches over, back cracking ominously as he does so. He winces at the slight twinge that goes through his back. He's out of shape. And old.

The state of the refrigerator—cleaned of all the ancient take-out containers and the stubborn residue sticking to the shelves—is still a shock to him, and he allows himself a moment to marvel at it. Without the old food crowding it, it's dismally empty. All that remains is one lone bottle of beer; it's not his usual choice, and it's nowhere near enough to get him where he needs to go. He takes it anyway, because something is always better than nothing, and twists the cap off. The sharp ridges dig into his skin, but he relishes in the brief discomfort.

He stands up, back once again cracking with the movement. Wilbur can see Tommy, sitting silent and still, on the couch in front of a dark TV. It's creepy, he determines as a shiver runs down his spine. It would've been even worse if he let Tommy go through with his original

plan. He can't imagine navigating his house in the dark only to trip on a stationary android on the floor, illuminated only by the harsh glow of his LED. That would be something of a horror movie.

He takes a sip of his drink, reveling in the bitter taste across his tongue. With a satisfied hum, he lets his eyes slide closed.

He really doesn't feel like drinking alone tonight. To be honest, he isn't sure what he'll do if he does, and he has enough will to live to take some preventative measures. With his free hand, he scoops up his keys from the pristine kitchen counter.

At the front door, he tosses on his jacket, worn down from years of use, and slips on his shoes. He casts one glance at Tommy, who seems to be lost in his own world, eyes glazed and blank and all kinds of unsettling. "I'm going out," he calls, gruffly—*kindly*, he thinks, since he bothered to warn Tommy in the first place. He has the distinct impression that if he didn't, Tommy might've tracked him down.

"Okay, Lieutenant," comes the faint reply.

Wilbur slams the door shut behind him and makes the unstable trek to his car.

Chapter End Notes

It's really fun to write between Wilbur and Tommy like I have been doing because Wilbur is always bursting with feelings and Tommy is... decidedly not. Yet >:)

This chapter is a little later than I would've liked, and I'm sorry about that. I may have made a slight miscalculation. Because of Thanksgiving break, I do, in fact, have more time to write, but I did not consider the fact that my family is a massive distraction. I probably won't get any more than usual out this break, but definitely over Christmas break :)

home alone

Chapter Summary

Tommy gets left home alone. A lot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Seven: Home Alone

September 6th, 2038

10:26 PM

The door slams shut. Outside, a car engine revs.

With a tilted head, he listens to the fading crunch of tires over a gravel driveway. Then, when the night falls silent once again, he sits up, arms stretching tall above his head.

It's been several days since they've begun this new routine, sinking into it like a familiar friend.

Wilbur, after discovering the joys of drinking outside of the house—away from Tommy, certainly—wasted no time in employing this brilliant strategy. And thus they began this new pattern. As soon as Tommy hit the couch, settling into his usual station, Wilbur was out the door, overcoat thrown hastily over his shoulders and lock fumbling shut behind him. He doesn't return until well into the early morning, stumbling over nothing and swaying with the alcohol in his system.

It leaves Tommy with a lot of unanticipated time.

He's alone now, sitting in a dark living room with nothing but the faint sound of his internal fans whirring and his own system to entertain him.

Not that he needs entertainment, nor is he even capable of feeling it. But his system longs for use; it longs for him to be useful. That familiar itch returns, untouchable and frantic beneath his skin. Settling back into stasis mode—the void, empty of any thought or consciousness at all—feels deeply unsatisfying.

His system cries out for something to do. But Tommy can only sit, vibrating with barely contained energy, and think.

He doesn't know what to make of this foreign dance they've engaged in.

Ever since... the incident—his LED flickers at the thought, burning a harsh yellow at his temple—Wilbur avoids him like the plague. Eyes downcast in what looks an awful lot like guilt—although what Wilbur has to be guilty over, Tommy has no idea—he responds to Tommy in brief, one word answers. His tone is clipped, strained with something unidentifiable.

It's a harsh contrast from before. Now, Tommy seeks Wilbur out frequently, offering help in any way he can think of in a desperate attempt to be useful. It's a pitiful effort, truly. But he's willing to try anything to improve their shaky relationship.

And improve, it has not. Time would dictate that Wilbur would slowly get used to his existence. Like him? Very unlikely. Tommy wasn't sure that Wilbur would ever like him, even with all the attempts in the world. He was stubborn, like some of the suspicious substances he'd cleaned earlier, stuck to the burners with a relentlessness that surprised him.

Like him? No, Tommy was becoming more and more certain that Wilbur would never allow that. But he could certainly learn to tolerate him.

And yet, their relationship had only decreased, reduced to fragments of clipped conversations in between work and quickly averted eyes. Even now, left alone in this empty house, Wilbur seeks to avoid him.

With a sudden and unexplainable increase in the restlessness in his very core, Tommy stands. His hands press deep into the cushions in a pathetic—and eventually successful—attempt to separate himself from the couch.

Although it's unnecessary, his hands run along the length of the wall until he finds the light switch. He flicks it, and the living room is cast in dim light.

He's already had time to go throughout the living room, becoming intimately familiar with its workings and with every speck of dust. But now, he stands, still and silent, as he takes it in for a second time. Already, new dust is beginning to accumulate. It gathers, creating a fine layer that mars every available surface, ruining all his painstaking work from before.

No matter. If anything, its appearance gives him something to do. Tommy runs a finger across the shoddy coffee table that upholds the TV. With a critical eye, he examines the particles, which are mostly composed of dead skin cells. He wrinkles his nose.

Grabbing a paper towel off of the fresh roll, he wets it under the spray of the faucet and carefully wrings it out. There's no need to drip water everywhere. He doesn't know how Wilbur will react if he does, but he doesn't want to find out.

Faintly, he processes the irrationality of those thoughts. It's very likely—around 78%, if his system is correct—that Wilbur will not care at all. The condition of the house before

Tommy's arrival into his life is an important indicator of how little Wilbur seemed to care about the pigsty he condemned himself to. And yet, he can't shake the feeling of dread that hovers over him at the idea of upsetting Wilbur.

Almost involuntarily, his eyes stray to the far wall. Right in the middle is a small patch of dried thirium, invisible to the human eye, but oh so visible to his sensors. It stains the wall, a contaminating and constant reminder.

He tenses. His artificial muscles draw tight like the taut string of a bow right before firing. With a harsh exhale, he turns away from the kitchen and returns to his work.

Draped in a wet cloth, Tommy runs his hand, lovingly, across the effected surfaces. He starts with the coffee table, wiping down the stained wood briefly, as to not alter the wood in any way. Then, he sweeps his hand over the TV screen, watching the wet streaks mark the reflective surface.

Wilbur's living room is an interesting place, he can't help but think as he carefully wedges the paper towel in every nook and cranny. It's an odd amalgamation of styles. Well-loved furniture, like the couch with its sunken cushions and peeling faux leather, mixed in with modern items, like the sleek flat screen TV and the industrial lamp shoved in the corner. It's a lot like Wilbur, in a sense. Confusing. Abrasive. Odd.

Tommy tucks his fingers in between metal poles of the lamp, squeezing the cloth to fit. As he cleans, he flicks the switch. The light it provides is warmer and much softer than the harsh ceiling lights. It bathes the den, so to speak, in a gentle light.

Above the TV, there are shelves built into the wall. Stacks of books sit, unorganized and cluttered, on the wood. Tommy lightly runs his hands over the rough edges. The workmanship looks poor, little splinters sticking out occasionally. It looks like Wilbur himself made it.

Tommy is careful to avoid bumping it as he wipes down the top of it, avoiding wetting any of the books. The books, stacked as they are, give off an unfinished feel; it's like how someone who just moved in would do it, haphazardly stacking them on the shelves to be spread out later. It doesn't feel like someone who's owned a house for a long time.

He moves on. There's no use in focusing on thoughts like those.

After quickly cleaning off the side table that's pressed against the wall connected to the kitchen—an odd thing, too tall and too long to be considered a coffee table, but strangely devoid of anything to support—he turns back to the center of the room. Tommy rounds the oblong coffee table, intent on wiping down the dust hidden on the other side. He has to duck his head, lest he smack into the shelves and send them falling to their—and the TV's—doom.

It's because of that, his head tilted down to avoid the rickety shelves, that he notices it at all.

Tucked carefully behind the TV, there's a wooden stand with a large compartment in the center. It's small, with short legs that bring it low to the ground.

Tommy frowns at it. He doesn't remember seeing it in his first cleaning sweep of the house. And that, more than anything, is disconcerting.

He crouches down, hand extended slowly like the strange object is some kind of feral animal that might bite back at any and every opportunity. It looks just like a large wooden box. His hand runs over the top. It's finely sanded, unlike the shelves above his head, and his hand catches on nothing. Tommy takes in the dark stain and the brilliant brass handle on the compartment door.

He traces nonsensical shapes on the wood subconsciously, fingers inching slowly down toward the handle. It doesn't make any sense why this is here, tucked away safely behind the TV. Glancing back at the odd table, it seems to make sense that this is what it once held. Why it's here, though, instead of packed away in the attic—Tommy has seen the outline of a descending staircase on Wilbur's ceiling, if only briefly—is a mystery.

With a quiet noise, Tommy lifts the mysterious object and sets the stand on top of its original table. It's much heavier than it looks, and he finds his fingers running over the top until he finds a smooth line in the wood that denotes a lid of some kind. Sure enough, there are rusted hinges on the back.

Brows drawn in confusion, he runs his nails under the line until he can pry the lid up.

Ah.

It's a record player.

Carefully, he props the lid up and peers inside.

He doesn't know what draws him in. He doesn't know what ancient spell, what mysterious and ineffable force compels him toward it. Maybe it's the warm light, reflecting off of the metal arm and illuminating it with soft oranges and blazing reds. Maybe it's the dense blackness of the platter and the little spindle in the middle, a pale, glinting light held out above the sea surrounding it.

Tommy gently slides his fingers along the base of the turntable, feeling the sturdy material that upholds the entire thing. Then, he finds all the little dials and switches on the top of the machine that control the volume and such.

His hand trails lower, catching on the handle and pulling it open in one smooth movement. Tucked inside the not-box are dozens of records, neatly lined for the picking.

Or maybe what's drawing him in is the records.

Like fate, he lets the universe decide. His thumb slides along the stiff edges of the records—with something that almost feels like *reverence*—until it eventually catches on one, stuck out farther than the rest. He pulls it out.

The cover, smooth and glossy and colorful, greets him. The edges are worn down, the cardboard material smoothed over from age and greedy human hands.

After doing a quick search of the album and the artist, Tommy learns that the song is not terribly old. It's certainly not old enough to have been originally on a record, which means that Wilbur must've custom ordered this.

Tilting the sleeve ever so carefully, he catches the record in his hand. It's smooth, a black pit that devours light and provides only a shimmering, shining reflection in its place. His nail, short and neat, traces it, running along the many grooves and dips in the vinyl.

He stares. His slack face, illuminated by a pulsing yellow LED, stares back.

Like a man drowning, Tommy fumbles to slot the record in place. Hands, unsteady and terribly shaky, clutch onto the record like a life-line. He doesn't know what this sensation is—a gripping, all-consuming desperation like he's never known before.

The record finally goes, like a horseshoe around its stake, speared directly in the middle. Trembling fingers move the needle over, and Tommy waits with bated breath.

For a long time, there's nothing. An uncanny silence fills the room, followed up by a faint static as the record starts to spin. He waits, unwilling to fight against whatever spell has captivated him so.

Soft, chiming notes, high and playful in their intensity, ring out into the room, empty except for its sole inhabitant. Tommy listens. His eyes, wide and helpless, fix on the spinning record.

And then the singing starts.

It's not even words, not yet. It's breathy and ethereal, the song of angels and the heavens. He finds himself breathing with the singer, in when his voice pitches high and out when it dips.

The beat drops, and the sound reverberates through him. It's a slow beat, steady and strong, and it feels like it travels throughout all of him, not stopping until it reaches his thirium pump. They beat in tune, in tandem—a duo of sorts. It feels like they were made to beat together.

I'm living in your world instead of mine.

The last word seems to stretch on forever, repeating and repeating with greater reverberation each time. Tommy leans forward, resting his head on the little table until the record player is pressed flat against his forehead. The vibrations travel through his skull, grounding and freeing at the same time.

He has no idea what a dream feels like. He wasn't granted the ability to sleep or to see those funky visions, unexplainable in their purpose.

But he can't help but think this is what it must feel like.

The chorus hits, and Tommy feels like he's falling. Wind whips through his hair, pulling at the golden strands with intensity but no force. There's no prickling pressure at the base of his skull, just a pleasant tingle that radiates throughout his entire body. His eyes slip closed.

He can almost see this odd scenario he's crafted. Pastel clouds, soft and billowy, surround him, illuminated with the golden light of the sun. He drops, wind whipping around him as he hurdles under the effects of gravity, but there is no ground awaiting him. It's just sky and sun and clouds, as far as the eye can see.

I just want to live inside my own... dream.

With the return of the lyrics, softer and more grounding in nature, he grips onto the table for dear life. The hard wooden edges dig into his palms as the drums beat through him. That ethereal singing, wordless and wise, is back, and it calls to him like a gentle lullaby, like a siren's song. Universal in its pull.

By the time the second chorus comes around, it's like he hits the face of the water. He's unable to do anything but sink, both into the warm water and into the music. Eyes opened wide, he reaches fruitlessly for the surface. Gone are the pastels and sun and the gentle summer air. Instead, they're replaced with flashes of light—dark violets and deep blues and royal golds and even lively maroons—pulsing in tune with the music. He sinks deeper, farther away from the sky and from his own sanity.

It's achingly beautiful, and *oh*, how Tommy *aches*.

The bridge is but a short reprieve. Tommy swallows around nothing—an ultimately useless action—and presses his forehead into the table hard.

Even if I don't know quite exactly where I want to be I...

Tommy can't breathe. No air will enter his system through his closed off throat, eyes squeezed tight. His hand uselessly clutches at his chest, nails scraping against the fabric it finds there. Logic dictates that he's an android and that he doesn't need to breathe.

He doesn't listen. He can't, choking and gasping on the intensity of the music.

I'm not gonna stay here stuck in someone else's dream.

He doesn't know nostalgia. He couldn't pick it out of a police line-up, nor could he even begin to describe it. Like dreams, it isn't for androids. And yet...

Maybe I'll find mine's a nightmare, but I don't even care.

He can almost taste it.

I just wanna live inside my own...

The final chorus arrives, music crashing back down on Tommy's paralyzed form like the unruly waves of a hurricane. It batters him, wave after wave smashing into him, but he's helpless to do anything to stop it.

No, it's worse than that.

He *won't* stop it.

One slip of his hand, and the music will stop. And yet, he refuses to stop it, content to live in this delirious state.

Software Instability: ^

The music tapers out with that familiar ethereal singing. Tommy is left panting, reeling with the overload of information and coming down from the high of such an indescribable experience. His system whirs, overwhelmed and frantically trying to right his unstable software.

Tommy can only bask in the aftermath and reset the needle.

September 8th, 2038

11:15 PM

The harsh light illuminates the room, and Tommy stares, wide eyed and unblinking, at the TV screen. The remote in his hand is sleek, and the plastic is cool despite his hand wrapped firmly around it.

His eyes flicker, roaming across every inch of the TV, but his mind goes even faster.

After listening to a few more of Wilbur's records—all wonderful but none of them came close to the first—he decided to peruse everything else in Wilbur's living room.

The books, atop their high shelves, held his interest for about an hour, but his involvement with them ended far too quickly due to his ability to consume words at a much higher speed than the average human. But, they did provide him with valuable insight not only into Wilbur—his choice of reading material was very telling—but also into humanity as a whole.

Which leads him to now. Browsing through the first streaming service he found after hesitantly turning on the TV, he finds that there are hundreds of TV shows and movies at his disposal. All of them would provide necessary understanding into the complexities of human interaction and into human beings in general. However, he can't help but browse through the titles, absorbing them and casually reading through their summaries.

He stops in the 'For Children' section, eyes drawn in by the colorful titles. There, his eyes catch on a picture of a house with a million balloons spilling out of the top.

With a curious hum, he clicks on it.

September 14th, 2038

10:01 PM

With a loud clang of rattling cans, Tommy sets the trash bags down on the curb. He wipes his forehead with the back of his hand from the (nonexistent) exertion. It's a completely needless action—too human in its reason—but something that lodged in his mind since he started his exploration of television programs.

The temperature, although Tommy disregards the actual number, is cool. He can feel it, faintly, on his skin and when a light breeze brushes by. He relishes in the feeling, head tilted back to the sky. There are no stars to greet him, just a thick patch of dull clouds. He frowns.

The last time he put the trash out early, he waited outside for hours, sticking to its side to ward off the raccoons that owned these streets. Now, he is indecisive. Stuck between the two, he is unsure whether he should abandon the bags in favor of something decidedly more useful or stay on the off-chance the pack has some kind of sixth sense for idle trash.

He hesitates. The clouds part, allowing the smallest bit of moonlight to illuminate the deserted street.

With a tilt to his head, he relents. The chances of the raccoons stopping by aren't low, per se—58% isn't low at all—but Tommy refuses to waste his valuable time sitting on the curb like last time.

He turns on his heel, facing the dimly lit house; after all, he has research to attend to. He stops in his tracks, audio receptors strained as he hears it. Deep in the far brush, way down the street, comes low, familiar chittering. One of the raccoons—a younger one—slinks out from within the leaves, lithe body held low to the ground.

It watches Tommy with wide, unblinking eyes. Tommy stares back with a determined refusal to be beaten in this impromptu staring contest by a raccoon.

The raccoon prowls forward, sticking to the odd territory between the fringe of the lawns and the beginning of the streets. Its little paws, like small hands, patter against the ground, leaving no marks at its approach. It stops a couple houses down and raises its head to look him in the eyes.

In response, Tommy plops down on the curb, arms crossed over his chest. If he needs to sit on this curb all night again, so be it. "You're not getting this trash," he tells it, hand groping around until he latches onto the bag. Wilbur would be very annoyed if he came back to trash littering the yard.

The thing doesn't seem to be discouraged by his voice or his appearance. In fact, the closer it comes, the bolder it seems. Faintly, Tommy wonders if the local wildlife have been desensitized to androids. Sure, they look like humans. But it's very rare that they'll interact with animals—for good or bad.

This seems to be the case as the raccoon approaches. It's about ten feet away now, steps slowed as it cautiously nears. Now that it's closer, Tommy can see how thin it is. Through the filthy fur, sticking up in every direction with some dampness, he can count its ribs. It bares its

yellowed teeth slightly, likely just as a precautionary warning. One of its ears is wounded, missing the rounded edge that is so characteristic of raccoons.

Software Instability: ^

"I can't let you have this," he tells the little creature, brows furrowed and mouth tilted into a frown, when it finally reaches him. Its hands stretch out, grasping at the plastic bag weakly.

There must be something wrong with the thing. The dirt and grime sticking to its fur is concerning, considering how clean raccoons usually are, and so is its behavior. Still, he doesn't relent. He can't.

Sensing his resilient determination, the raccoon stops pawing at the trash. Instead, it regards him with terribly young eyes—large, brown eyes, wide with innocence. Tommy stares back and pretends that he isn't the least bit effected. "Stop it," he says, eyes darting away before he does something stupid. "You aren't cute."

There's a paw digging into his stomach. Tommy glances down just as the raccoon hops up, settling its—worryingly light—weight on his lap. It curls up, little hands clenched around the fabric of his shirt. He reaches out with a trembling hand and gently runs it down the raccoon's back. It makes a low, pleased chittering sound.

Tommy sighs. He's going to do something stupid.

Gently shooing the thing off his lap and ignoring the betrayed looks it shoots him, he stands up and turns on his heel. Light spills out as he opens the door, holding it wide open with a pointed look back at the raccoon. "Wilbur will destroy me if he finds out I let a raccoon in his house," he tells it, conversationally. Despite the casual tone to his words, his LED flickers, betraying his stress. "So you better hurry up."

Tommy doesn't know if the raccoon actually understands anything about the situation, but it does skitter into the warm house.

With yet another sigh, Tommy closes the door behind it and disappears into the kitchen to prepare a snack. He pretends that his lips aren't tilted into a soft smile.

September 11th, 2038

8:49 PM

He bites his lip, stopped in his tracks by his own indecision. The door before him is daunting, and, although it's the same size as every other door, it seems to tower over him. Tommy hesitates.

With a shake of his head, he takes a step back. There's no way he'll pull this off. As soon as he steps through the threshold, Wilbur will just *know*. Despite all the counter arguments piling up in his processor, Tommy is certain of that. Wilbur *will* know, and he will be pissed.

As soon as he takes a step back, he immediately takes another step forward. It's necessary, his system argues back against the illogical wave. Anything to accomplish his mission, his system screams.

Wilbur's harsh words—"I don't want you in my room."—play on a repeating loop inside his head. By stepping through this door, he is breaking a direct order. That makes him no better than the deviants he hunts.

But, his system whispers—a slippery snake hiding in the tall grass—Wilbur's orders conflict against Cyberlife's. Tommy is meant to work with the Lieutenant in order to catch deviants. How is he meant to work with the man if he can't befriend him? How is he meant to befriend him if he knows so very little about him?

It's flimsy logic, at best, but his system holds onto it like it's a lifeline.

Eventually, the curiosity that's built into his very code wins out. With a sharp twist of his wrist, he wrenches open the door.

Wilbur's room reflects the conditions of the house B.T. (before Tommy), but it seems... a lot *more*. Tommy can't tell if stewing in cleanliness has made the mess before him seem greater or if Wilbur's room was always the messiest place in the house, but it seems to be in a whole other league of its own.

Piles of dirty laundry cover the floor until Tommy can't even see the floor poking out from underneath. He steps carefully, paying extra attention to make sure nothing is disturbed. His feet sink into the soft, upper layer, and he frowns.

Wilbur's bed is a mess of wrinkled blankets and discarded wine bottles. They clink together when Tommy experimentally presses down on the mattress.

Not for the first time, Tommy itches with the need to be useful. If Wilbur would just let him clean...

But, he's not here to observe all the things he can't touch. He looks around, eyes focused on finding *something* to work with. Wedged in the corner, barely propped up even with two walls supporting it, sits a guitar. The varnish glimmers in the low light, and the strings glint. He already knew that Wilbur played guitar, but seeing it is something else. He wonders, faintly, if he's any good at playing. If his music would feel anything like the spinning records on the player.

Tommy averts his gaze before he loses himself down that rabbit hole. Instead, he considers the clothes heaped on the floor, taking in any consistent styles or brands. He searches through the room—violent but only with his eyes—until he's assessed every corner; until he's found every last clue to the enigma that is Wilbur.

His eyes catch on the little table next to the bed, which is covered in half-full glasses and empty chip bags. Underneath the mess, he can see a picture frame. It's hidden amongst the assorted trash, but there nonetheless. The front of it is set down against the table, so Tommy can only see the cardboard back. He reaches for it.

The front door swings open with a quiet creak that reverberates through the hall, catching Tommy's advanced hearing. He freezes, breath catching in his lungs. His LED spins red.

He sprints for the door, still careful to avoid messing the room up in any noticeable way. His feet slip on the clothes, and, for one terrifying moment, he's sure that he'll fall. Images of blue blood staining the walls flash before his eyes.

His hands catch on the wall audibly, but he doesn't wait. Tommy throws himself out of the room, shutting the door as quietly and quickly as he can. His thirium pump beats against his chest. When he looks up, Wilbur enters the hallway from the kitchen.

He flinches back when he spots Tommy. Then, his eyes narrow. "What were you doing?" he questions.

Tommy doesn't know whether to be thankful that Wilbur initiated some form of contact or to be terrified. In the face of such indecision, his stress levels rise.

Despite the panic building in his chest, he forces himself to take an imperceivable breath. "I was checking the bathroom to see if it needed freshening up," he answers. His tone is perfectly monotone, face straight and unassuming.

Wilbur stares at him for a long moment. His eyes flicker up to Tommy's LED, which is circling a forced blue. "Whatever," he mutters, tucking his phone into his pocket. "I'm going back out. I just forgot my phone."

And with that, the door slams shut behind him.

Tommy lets out a breath, hand reaching out to brace himself against the wall. He just lied to Wilbur.

He just lied to Wilbur.

September 18th, 2038

11:42 PM

Tommy blinks as his awareness shifts.

Rain, harsh and cool, splatters against his skin. Within seconds in the downpour, his suit is soaked through.

Despite the harsh conditions, he stands in the spray, tilting his head up to stare at the dull clouds that have gathered. A particularly large drop hits the center of his forehead, and he smiles.

Like every time he visits this odd space, he can't help but cast his gaze toward the forest. Water droplets gather on the leaves, drooping them with their combined weight. If he squints hard enough, he can almost imagine what's inside, whatever great vision is obscured by their thick trunks.

For some reason, the words of the song echo throughout his skull—*I just wanna live inside my own dream*—and Tommy stares, wide eyed. Almost involuntarily, he steps forward.

“Tommy.”

Tommy startles, whipping around violently.

Dream stands in the open doorway, backlit by the candlelight. There's something about him—the tension in his shoulders, his harsh grip on the doorknob, the displeased tilt to his exposed mouth—that seems annoyed. Maybe it's because of Tommy, bearing the worst of the violent storm and daring to step toward the surrounding forest.

The music has made him brave.

“What are you doing in the rain?” he asks. There is no note of concern in his voice like there might've been before. He's terrifyingly monotone, keeping his cards annoyingly close to his chest.

Tommy can only offer a weak smile. “Sorry, Dream.” It's not what Dream was looking for, if the way the corner of his lips twitch downwards is any indication, but it's all Tommy has. There is no grand plan, no greater explanation that would be able to clear up any confusion.

All that Tommy knows is that he listens to music, and he envisions that forest.

However, he can feel the danger radiating from that thought, and his system shies away from it. So he stops thinking about it and instead carefully brushes past Dream, terribly aware of his following gaze.

Stepping inside after the torrential downpour shocks his system. It's stifling in the house, warm and soft and smelling of something undeniably sweet. Going from outside—all earthy scents, faint breeze, and shockingly cool rain—to... this—windows fogged up, air stifled with the heavy smell of incense and smoke—it's almost overwhelming, to say the least.

His clothes, waterlogged and heavy, seep, and he listens to the quiet drip of water droplets hitting the floor. He's hyperaware of the press of wet cloth against his skin, shifting with every artificial breath. With an agitated roll of his shoulders, he shrugs off his jacket and drapes it over a nearby chair to dry.

Dream brushes past him silently—which does little to alleviate Tommy's mounting stress—and sits back on one of the beds. “How has the investigation been going?”

Tommy's fingers still where they had been attempting to wrestle out of his tie. His eyes focus on some point above Dream's shoulder. "Ah... it has been going... slowly," he answers, hesitant to provide a reply when he knows what Dream's reaction will be. "Lieutenant Soot has been more uncooperative than usual ever since we had an... altercation."

His LED flickers yellow. Was calling what had happened an altercation truly appropriate? It wasn't even like they had a fight. Wilbur yelled at him, and Tommy took it, as he was expected to. That was it.

But the word altercation makes it seem as if Tommy had some part to play in it, other than offending Wilbur with his very existence.

Dream frowns, hands searching the row of beds until he finds some lost object. It turns out to be a long, thin stick. He sets the stick on his lap, hands running over the course bark. "Tell me about it."

Tommy fiddles with the edge of his tie. He has no coin in this world, and his hands ache with the loss of it. "After our last talk, I was eager to prove my usefulness, and I may have been a bit... ah, too forward. He did not react kindly to my offer to clean his room, nor did he seem to like the idea of me touching the room at the end of the hallway." His head throbs with phantom pressure. He half-expects to find a system warning in the corner of his vision, but nothing pops up. "He reacted rather violently."

Dream hums once. His hand reaches into his pocket, pulling out a thick, metal object. He flicks it, and a knife comes swinging out. The light glints off it harshly.

Tommy doesn't breathe.

"I can't say I'm surprised," he says, twisting the knife in his hand until he grips it steadily. His thumb leads it, and Tommy watches as the edge digs into the bark. It glides along the stick, carving away the top layer to reveal soft wood underneath. "But I *am* disappointed."

It's like a punch to the gut. Tommy doubles over a little, face contorted in pain. "I'm sorry. I can do better," he says immediately, breathless.

"Yes. You can." Dream lets the shaved bark fall to the ground. It lands without a sound. "And you'll have to."

"I don't—" Tommy makes a frustrated noise, hands coming up to run through the wet hair plastered to his forehead. "I don't know what to do," he admits pathetically. "I've tried being friendly, but he hates androids. I've tried showing my abilities, but he doesn't let me participate in investigations. I've tried showing my *usefulness*, but he doesn't want me touching anything." Water drips down the sides of his face, squeezed out from sodden hair. "And *now*! Now, he won't even *look* at me."

Dream stills. The blade digs into the pad of his thumb, but no blood is shed. "Oh, Tommy." He sighs. "I worried it might be too early for you."

Tommy tenses, eyes snapping up to stare at Dream. “It’s not too— Why would you say that?” He waited so long to finally be put into the field.

“You’re forgetting core parts of your programming. Your system knows what to do, but you’re not letting it.”

Not letting it? Tommy frowns, brow furrowed. His eyes dart around the room, uselessly looking for some kind of hint. Core parts of his programming... His programming was vast, a bottomless pit of useful tools and abilities. His lips move soundlessly as he mentally runs through the list. “Adapting to any situation,” he says finally.

Dream continues to carve; little pieces of wood catch on his sleeves. He brushes them away with a patient hand. “Got it in one.” He sets the knife down on the bedside table. “Now, how do you adapt to this situation? How do you get Wilbur to like you?”

Tommy frowns. Clearly, he has no idea or they wouldn’t be having this conversation. He doesn’t dare voice that, though.

Dream rewords. “What is currently stopping Wilbur from liking you?”

Tommy considers this. “The fact that I’m an android,” he answers haltingly. His head tilts to the side. “And maybe also just... how I act in general. He seems to have a problem with my artificial cheerfulness.”

“You can’t help the fact that you’re an android,” Dream points out, quite uselessly. Tommy is already well aware of that. “But your personality... Well, that can be adapted to fit whatever situation, right?”

Tommy gapes. “Adapt my personality.”

“Yep.” To add insult to injury, Dream pops the p. “All you have to do is find someone he seems to enjoy, analyze their mannerisms, and then mimic their behavior.”

The answer is so blatantly obvious. It’s embarrassing that it took him this long, and help from Dream, to realize it. “Analyze someone he enjoys...” Tommy trails off, mouth twisting into a frown. Wilbur didn’t seem to *enjoy* anyone. He barely even tolerated most people.

This was going to be a lot harder than it sounded.

September 21st, 2038

12:23 AM

With the record player sat in his lap—the thing is too large to sit comfortably, sharp edges digging into his thighs while his arms unsteadily wrap around it—the vibrations beat right into his chest, his thirium pump, up into his central processor.

Tommy hums along, drunk on the sound and more than content to sit on the cold floor, back pressed into the base of the couch. It's how he spends most of his time, nowadays, lost in the crooning songs and in his own visions of sprawling tree branches.

He isn't quite sure why.

His system assures him it's to become more familiar with humanity. Watching their shows, listening to their music, it's all a part of his assimilation. Everything he does is toward his mission. So, this must be, too.

Either way, he doesn't—*can't*—care. He cranes his head forward, awkwardly settling it against the trembling wood. Wrapped around the machine, the music overtakes all his senses until it's the only thing he can feel. It's like he's lost in a void, detached from reality, floating in an endless abyss.

It reminds him of stasis mode but not at the same time. Stasis mode *is* a void, but one where he ceases to exist. Tommy enters it and is robbed of everything—time, thought, sensation, consciousness, existence. Here, in this dank living room with music beating into his very *soul*—androids don't have souls—he is all too present. Over aware of his existence, of his identity, of all the little bits and pieces of code that create him, he stews and he considers and he—

He doesn't dream. He can't.

But it almost feels like he can.

Through the haze, he somehow hears it. It's like a faint tickling at the base of his skull, a desperate call to return to reality. He shakes his head, as if trying to dislodge a particularly annoying fly, and settles back into the forest.

It's quiet, for a time, but then the noise—a faint, low ringing—returns, louder and more persistent.

Pulling himself from the warm water, shaking off dirt and the profound weight settling back on his shoulders, he stumbles. Feet heavy and clunky, he staggers through the living room and toward the kitchen. Sitting on the counter, jumping with the force of its buzzing, is Wilbur's phone. It's still plugged in, and the charger holds it from toppling right off the counter.

He must've forgotten it again.

Tommy stares blankly at it, mind back with the too faint music. The caller ID displays the captain's name.

Before his mind can catch up, he picks up the phone and brings it to his ear.

“Oh! Wil!” Phil's voice says, sounding surprised but pleased. “You picked up.” It's a confirmation of something he already knew—Wilbur rarely, if ever, answers his phone—but Tommy files the information away, anyway.

“Uh, no, this is Tommy,” he answers, running a hand over his face. It’s like there’s cotton shoved in his processor, stopping him from forming any coherent thoughts. His voice comes out groggy. “He left his phone at home.”

“Oh.” Disappointment. Tommy frowns at the sound of it. “Oh, well, a case just came in for you two. A body was discovered—a homicide, and there’s a possibility that an android was involved.” That clears the fog. The information is a bucket of cold water, dousing him and returning him to his senses with a sharp inhale.

“Oh. I’ll be sure to let Lieutenant Soot know. We’ll be there soon.”

“Okay. Thank you, Tommy. And—” he trails off. He sighs. “Never mind.”

Tommy blinks. “Okay. Goodbye, Captain.”

“Bye, Tommy.”

Shutting off the phone and tucking it into his back pocket, Tommy turns on his heel. He shuts off the record player and carefully tucks it back where he found it. Then, he turns off all the lights and exits into the dark night.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone is wondering, the song Tommy hears at first is Someone Else's Dream by Absufacto. It's one of my absolutely favorites :)

Transcribing the feeling of listening to music is fucking hard! It was also kinda fun, so I hope it came out well. It was mostly me listening to the song, focusing on how I feel listening to it, and then frantically typing my word vomit before I lose feeling. I thought it was fitting though, since I imagine hearing music for the first time must be an overwhelming experience.

I'm sorry for being so late. It's approaching finals week, which is really slowing me down, but I also really struggled with inspiration on this one, despite the fact that I was really excited for this chapter :/ I hope the extra length makes up for it a little bit! For this next week, I'm not going to be able to post as frequently. I'll probably only post one chapter as opposed to two.

the introduction of a villain

Chapter Summary

An investigation occurs, and new evidence is found.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Eight: The Introduction of a Villain

September 21st, 2038

1:08 AM

Neon lights glint off of wet pavement. Little droplets of rain splatter against his clothes, his hair, catching on his eyelashes. He wipes them away with an already damp palm. Jimmy's bar—or so the sign says, casting the street in pale blue light—stands before him. It's a little establishment, all weathered brick and smooth wooden doors. On the front, a giant, laminated sign is plastered, a bright red warning. No androids are allowed, the sign says, right above the sign outlawing dogs.

Tommy flicks his coin in the air, catching it between deft fingers. It seems the two are equivalent, in the owner's eyes.

He ignores it. Obviously.

The interior of the bar is dark. The walls are composed of dark wood, and the floors are layered with black tile. There are a few lights, too dispersed amongst the dim establishment, and they pulse with a nauseating fluorescent light. A long bar wraps around the majority of the room, and behind it stands a man, long curls pulled back from his face. Behind him, yet another neon sign spelling out the name resides.

He scans the room, taking in all the names and faces and tucks them away in a holding space of sorts—where he keeps information too unimportant to occupy space but not too irrelevant to scrub from his drives.

“Shit,” one of the residents says, looking up from his drink long enough to notice Tommy standing in the doorway. “I thought androids weren't allowed.”

Tommy considers him with a tilted head but ultimately dismisses him. He, unlike other androids, is permitted to break rules and orders if it means furthering his mission. Right. *His mission.*

A laugh, high and obnoxious, disrupts him from any further investigation.

Sat at the forefront of the bar, Wilbur throws back a shot of whiskey. Next to him, leaning into his space, face open and relaxed from the alcohol no doubt in his system, is Quackity.

Tommy hesitates, taking a moment to observe them both. Wilbur's face is just as relaxed, mouth curved up in faint amusement. His eyes crinkle, a smile finally breaking across his face from whatever Quackity says to him.

This certainly would count as enjoyment, wouldn't it?

Tommy shifts his focus from a begrudgingly amused Wilbur to Quackity. His mouth moves rapid-fire, body leaned far into Wilbur's space. One of his hands holds a pint glass while the other wraps itself around the intimate junction between Wilbur's shoulder and his neck. Every once in a while, his grin will stretch so wide across his face, and his hand will thump Wilbur's back enthusiastically.

Tommy tucks the mannerisms away to consider later.

Before he can do anything—something to make his presence acknowledged, which will no doubt ruin Wilbur's remarkable mood—Quackity's eyes meet his. They stare at each other for a long moment before his temporarily slack face breaks into a grin. "Holy shit!" he says, far too loudly, and the rest of the patrons follow his pointing arm. "Look! It's—it's..." he fumbles, eyes narrowing with the intensity of his concentration. "*Tomás!*" he settles on, accent thick and weighty.

Tommy blinks. He doesn't move, too uncertain with how to proceed. His processors fire, attempting to provide him with some kind of path here.

Quackity slips from the high barstool and stumbles over, greedy hands outstretched. When he reaches Tommy, he cups his face with both hands. "Wilbur, look! It's this guy!" He throws a happy grin over his shoulder to Wilbur. The expression on his face must mirror Tommy's, because they're both frozen in shock and uncertainty. "What are you doing here, buddy?"

Tommy's head swims with the energy, and he allows Quackity to steer him over to the barstool. He even allows him to shove him into his abandoned spot, wedged uncomfortably between Quackity—who does not exit his space, furnace of an arm thrown over his shoulders—and Wilbur. He tries to ignore the way Wilbur leans away from him. "Uh, I'm here for Lieutenant Soot."

"Lieutenant Soot," Quackity mocks. He laughs, eyes crinkled in joy, and gently shakes Tommy until he ends up tucked against the man. "You're a riot, man. Sometimes, I'll be minding my own fucking business, and I'll remember that fucking—that 'pissing contest' comment. Funniest shit I've ever heard." His hand sneaks up, ruffling Tommy's hair.

Quackity's energy is infectious, and Tommy can't help but smile. "I appreciate the sentiment, but I wasn't intending on humor."

Wilbur scoffs, eyes rolling as he takes a second shot.

"Oh, shut it," Quackity fires out, eyes narrowed at Wilbur but with that same smile still cemented on his face. "He's just jealous you're funnier than him," he whispers conspiratorially. "But dude, you gotta lighten up a bit. You're so stiff." His hand comes down hard, patting against his shoulder blade. "*I appreciate the sentiment*," he mimics in a truly horrendous British accent.

Wilbur chokes. Some of his drink drips down his chin, and he hides a smile behind his palm.

Tommy, however, frowns. "How, then, should I speak?" The words, although meant to be inquisitive and neutral, come out sarcastically deadpan. Quackity's grin widens.

"First off, none of that stiff, mechanical-type shit. You gotta— If you're not cussing every other word, then what the fuck are you doing?" Tommy blinks. He opens his mouth, likely to say that he is, in fact, a machine, and so his type of speaking is perfectly on par, but Quackity bulldozes over him. "Have you ever cussed before?"

"Yes."

"What word?"

This all feels very childish. Which, he supposes faintly, is what he gets for conversing with drunk people. "You were there," he says stiffly.

Quackity's brows raise. "Piss? That's your one cuss word?" He presses his lips together into a thin line—a piss-poor attempt at smothering his laughter. "Dude, that's like... bottom tier shit. I was saying piss when I was like nine years old."

"And you never grew up." Wilbur wipes a non-existent tear from his eye. "Truly inspirational."

Quackity levels him with an unimpressed look. There's a spark behind his eyes, however, that betrays his amusement. Tommy drinks in their interactions greedily. "Say fuck right now."

He shifts in his seat. "Why?"

"Why not?" Quackity shrugs. "Because you can. Because it's fun." Tommy frowns and resists the urge to interject. He's not meant to experience fun, and, even if he was, he doesn't understand how saying a word could be fun. "Hey, Wilbur, say fuck."

Wilbur stares at him. He seems to teeter on the edge of humoring Quackity and flat out ignoring him. "Fuck," he says eventually.

"Fuck," Quackity adds with a grin. Then, he jostles Tommy. "Now you."

Tommy hesitates. It really is just a word. There's nothing barring him from saying it. Besides, this is all part of his integration. Wilbur clearly likes Quackity. Playing the part of some kind of court jester can't really hurt, right? He gives in with a slight incline of his head. "Fuck," he says quietly, contained to just the three of them.

Quackity cheers, hands beating against him. "Louder!" His laughter, much like his energy, is infectious.

Tommy grins. "Fuck!"

Several of the other patrons are watching them now, eyes narrowed in disdain, either at the amount of noise they're making—it's a notably mellow bar—or because of the LED serenely spinning on Tommy's temple. Since he entered seventeen minutes ago, the bartender—yes, *the* Jimmy from Jimmy's bar—has not stopped glaring at him.

"See?" Quackity prompts, although Tommy doesn't, not really. "It's like catharsis, or something, man."

"Androids aren't allowed," Jimmy finally says, voice a low baritone, and eyes narrowed, not at Tommy, but at *Wilbur*. "Out of all people, I didn't think I'd have to tell *you*."

Wilbur recoils like he's been physically slapped.

"Hey, man. He's not even doing anything," Quackity protests. For the first time since Tommy met him, his mouth twists into a frown. His arm tightens, ever so slightly, around Tommy's neck.

"It's disturbing the other customers." If anything, Quackity looks even more pissed, although Tommy can't fathom why. "Plus, there's clearly a sign outside. It's not my fault this thing is defective and can't read."

Tommy, despite the increasingly bitter bartender in front of him—leaning over the bar and gesturing empathically at Tommy while he argues with a spitting Quackity—watches Wilbur instead. His eyes are downcast, locked on the empty shot glass in front of him. His fingers reach out, and they trace along the side, collecting the condensation beading on the glass. Tommy takes in the screwed-up frown, and his pinched expression, although he, for once, has no idea what it means.

Wilbur is, truly, an enigma.

"Alright, alright, for fuck's sake," Quackity hisses. He stands suddenly, barstool knocking out from underneath him and clattering on the ground with a loud noise. They've gathered the attention of the entire bar, now, and not one person is pretending otherwise. "Come on, Tomás." He tugs the arm around his shoulders, pulling Tommy with him toward the doors.

Tommy, despite coming here for a single purpose, is helpless to do anything but be pulled along.

The rain has stopped. The whole street smells like earth and wet pavement. The clouds, despite being devoid of all liquid, still remain, dark and swirling. Tommy stares.

Beside him, Quackity seethes. “I can’t believe him. What an *asshole*.” If he focuses hard enough, Tommy can still smell the alcohol on his breath. Faintly, he wonders if Quackity would do this if he wasn’t drunk. Faintly, he wonders why Quackity is doing this at all.

The door creaks open and then promptly slams shut. Wilbur stands in front of it, looking positively murderous. “I cannot believe you,” he spits, stalking closer in an all too familiar way. His LED burns a frantic yellow, and he takes a hesitant step back. Wilbur must catch something in his expression because he stops and pales.

“Alright, calm down. Tomás didn’t fucking *do* anything.” There’s a hand on Wilbur’s chest now, all five fingers splayed wide over his ancient overcoat.

Wilbur gestures to him. He’s significantly calmer now, but Tommy still flinches a little. “Why are you even here? What could you possibly need me for?” He leans away, feet carrying him backward until his back hits the wall of the bar. His hands scrub over his face. “I can’t even get one fucking break.”

Something stirs inside him—some dark, insidious thing. He clenches his jaw, gritting his teeth against the bitter words that threaten to spill out. Because Wilbur took breaks all week while Tommy was stuck inside his house, choking on his own uselessness. Because Wilbur and his obnoxious dislike were getting in the way of important investigations. Because Wilbur is frustratingly *incompetent*.

But he, obviously, doesn’t voice any of that. And he likely never will.

Tommy reaches into his pocket, pulling out Wilbur’s phone. His thumb brushes over the faint and many scratches on the glass screen. Then, he offers it to Wilbur. “You forgot your phone,” he says. His voice, while not a careful neutral or cultivated brightness, is not angry or bitter, either. It’s dead, completely devoid of any intonation and straying far past monotone.

Wilbur watches him, gaze flickering between his outstretched hand and his face. He reaches out slowly and grabs it. “Is that all?”

Tommy scowls. The expression is foreign on his face. “No, that’s not all. I wouldn’t show up just for that. I have better things to do than babysit drunk detectives.” He does not, in fact, have anything better to do, but he sure isn’t going to let Wilbur know that.

Wilbur reels back; he blinks rapidly in front of such novel hostility.

And his plan to befriend Wilbur is already going to shit.

Tommy presses his lips together into a thin line. “You received a call from the Captain. There’s a case that needs attending to.”

“A case.”

“A case,” Tommy repeats, not backing down from Wilbur’s silent challenge. “A man was found dead in his home. It’s a homicide. And there’s reason to suspect android involvement.”

Wilbur’s brows raise. “A homicide? With possible android involvement.” The implications of this are not lost on Wilbur. “*Shit*,” he breathes, hand tugging through his greasy hair.

“Well, you better get to it, then. I’ll see you later, Wilbur,” Quackity says, voice a little strained. He gives the man a friendly pat on the shoulder. *It’s impressive*, Tommy thinks faintly, *how relatively unaffected Quackity is from the whole ordeal*. Quackity turns to him with a softer, more sincere smile. “See ya, Tomás.” And with a friendly ruffle through his curls, Quackity disappears down the street.

For a moment, neither of them say anything. They stand in the deserted street, listening to the faint jazz from the bar behind them and avoiding eye contact. “Well, I guess we should go, then.” Wilbur holds up his keys. They clank together in his hand.

“Okay,” Tommy agrees, scanning the cars lining the street until he spots Wilbur’s beat-up car. “But I’m driving.”

And with that, he plucks the keys out of Wilbur’s drunken hands, and makes his way toward the car, leaving a dumbfounded Wilbur trailing awkwardly behind him.

The driveway is a mess of activity. Cop cars line the street, tires pressed flat against the sidewalk and neon lights flashing obnoxious shades of red and blue. They glint against the slick pavement, and the whole neighborhood is illuminated. Pedestrians gather, indifferent to the gentle rain and the late time. Some of them are dressed in pajamas—clearly, neighbors woken up by the commotion. They’re gathered behind holographic police lines and a single police android in an impeccable uniform.

Wilbur slams the door shut behind him, shoulders hunched and hands shoved deep into his pockets. It’s clear he’s still throwing his tantrum, pouting after he didn’t get his way.

Tommy nearly rolls his eyes at that but stops mid-motion. Did he really expect Tommy to let him drive drunk? Or was he simply mad at being treated like a child, having to be driven around? *You are what you act like*, he thinks faintly as he shuts the car door and follows after Wilbur.

His shoes slap against the wet pavement, and Tommy focuses on them instead of the crowd. He feels their inquisitive, demanding gaze burning on the side of his face, on the LED in his temple. He ignores it; instead, he focuses on Wilbur’s back, muscles moving beneath his jacket with every step. He finds himself cataloging his movements, memorizing his steps.

Wilbur passes through the holographic police tape with little resistance. Tommy... not so much.

“No androids past this point,” the android tells him, kind in his own android way. He holds up his hand, not touching Tommy or trying to physically restrain him in any way, but simply a gesture to go along with his words. Something within Tommy burns to point out that he is an android and that he’s past said point. He doesn’t, though, and simply stares at the back of Wilbur’s head.

He spots the way his shoulders tense. Wilbur halts in place, indecision clearly written in the way he sways back and forth, like he can’t decide whether to step in or move along. In the end, he turns slightly to look over his shoulder. “He’s with me.” His voice is weighed down with exhaustion, and every line in his face tells the same story.

Tommy, with a side glance at the android that somehow feels smug, follows after Wilbur. The holographic tape ripples as he passes through it.

The house looks worse for wear. The front lawn is covered in patchy brown grass and littered with trash. The porch is wet and sagging with age, which doesn't even mention the house itself. The paint, dulled by a thin sheen of dirt, is peeling off, and the few windows are coated with grime.

“Listen,” Wilbur says when Tommy catches up to him, tone low and dark and full of promise. “You stay out of my way, and you don’t touch *anything*. Okay?” Clearly, Wilbur expects this to go like their past conversations. For Tommy to bend to his will with a subservient smile and a gentle, ‘*Okay, Lieutenant.*’

But Tommy doesn’t feel so inclined. He meets Wilbur’s gaze with a level stare. “No, thank you.”

Wilbur reels back. “No?”

“No,” Tommy agrees with a subtle incline of his head. “I was created with a purpose, and I’m going to fulfill that purpose.” Wilbur gapes at him, mouth open slightly like a particularly confused fish. “Not you nor your attempted—shall we say *threats*?” he ponders with a slight tilt to his head. “Your threats won’t keep me from my mission.”

Then, without further word from either of them, Tommy stalks past Wilbur, letting their shoulders brush together as he passes.

The interior of the house is just as decrepit as the front. The wallpaper peels off the walls, worn with age. It reveals patches of yellowed wall beneath. Empty cans, plastic bags full of trash, and a variety of crumpled wrappers litter the carpeted floor and the squat coffee table shoved in the corner.

Several officers mill around the house, although they mostly crowd around the body on the ground. Carlos Ortiz, or so a quick facial scan tells him, lies dead on the floor. His stained shirt is rucked up to expose a white, bloated belly marred with dozens of blood-crusting lacerations. He lies in an uncomfortable heap, head and shoulders propped up against the wall. There’s a massive blood smear behind him, mapping out his path as he stumbled and slid down the wall.

Tommy already begins reconstructing the scene, starting with the vivid image of him tripping over the scattered debris, back slamming against the wall before slipping to the ground.

Above him, the words ‘I AM ALIVE’ are written perfectly in dried blood. Whoever wrote it—and Tommy already has suspicions that an android did, considering the even spacing—wrote in Cyberlife sans.

“Jesus,” Wilbur breathes when he enters, hand immediately cupping over his nose and mouth. Tommy can sense the decomposition in the air, tingling and ringing alarm bells in his sensors. Behind him, the detective gags.

“Oh, Lieutenant!” One of the officers, a young lad with a too-large cap smothering down his mess of red hair, approaches with a somewhat apprehensive look. “You came.” He doesn’t even bother hiding the surprise blatant all over his freckled face.

Wilbur, too used to this treatment by now, only acknowledges him with a vague scowl. He gestures to the room—the swarming cops, the body, and the small, numbered markers denoting the evidence. “What’s the situation?”

The officer scrambles, fingers fumbling for a notepad tucked into his tight front pocket. The thing is scrunched, pages curling in on themselves. He squints as he reads the messy writing. “Right. Right,” he says, mostly to himself. “The, uh, body was called in by the landlord. The victim hadn’t been paying his rent, so she stopped by to check on him. Quite a, uh, quite a shock when she unlocked the door to see... this.” The officer gestures to the corpse. Flies swarm around his head and land on his unresponsive face every so often.

Wilbur grimaces. Another officer, a woman with gray hair tucked back in a tight bun, hands him a pair of plastic gloves. He slips them on without any acknowledgement to the woman.

Tommy frowns.

“He looks like he’s been here for a while,” Wilbur muses, approaching and then crouching down next to the victim. Tommy watches him in silent approval; the way Wilbur switches between himself and the role of a detective fascinates him. His face clears of all emotion, eyes sharp and keen as they sweep over the body.

It’s likely the only thing Tommy respects about him.

Yet another officer hands Wilbur some kind of UV light. He turns it on with a flick and runs it over the body. “Did this have to be called in *now*? The state he’s in...” Wilbur trails off, taking in the vacant, bulging eyes. He glances back at the officer. “This couldn’t have waited until tomorrow?”

The officer looks unimpressed. Something about his face—expression fighting the irritated look it naturally wants to assume—displays his thoughts perfectly clear: *Would it really have made a difference in how likely you were to show up?*

Something in Wilbur’s face changes. His expression darkens, lips curling ever so slightly to bare his teeth.

Tommy steps forward. “What do we know about his android?” he prompts. Given enough time, he’s sure that Wilbur could pick a fight with a metal pole. He’s keen to avoid anything interfering with the investigation.

“His android?” The officer glances at him, face scrunched. He glances down at his scribbled notes. “Very little. The neighbors confirmed he had one, but nobody from the precinct has seen it.” He snaps his fingers, something like an epiphany exploding over his features. “The killer must’ve disposed of it since it saw the crime.”

Tommy considers the message written on the wall. He takes in the perfection of it all, the message and intent behind it. “Something like that.” He kneels down on the other side of the body.

Wilbur gestures to the officer to continue, and he does.

Tommy lets the flow of information drift through his head, pushed to the very back of his processor. He listens, albeit distantly, about how the front door was locked and how the windows were all boarded up. Tommy marks that somewhere in his head. The back door is an option for escape that he’ll have to check out later. After accessing the floor plans for the house, he confirms that it does indeed have an attic. That’s also something to look into.

The body is estimated to be about three weeks old. A coroner will be around later to confirm the time of death, but Tommy doesn’t need that. He can tell the estimate is solid, solely based on the rate of decomposition and the environmental factors. Furthermore, his system estimates the time of death to be near midnight.

Considering the stab wounds littering his front and the bloody knife not even a few feet away from the body, the cause of death was clearly stabbing. No fingerprints were found on the weapon, although considering Tommy’s suspicions, that’s not surprising.

The officer coughs, arm coming up to shield his nose from the offensive odors. “That’s all I have. I gotta—” he cuts off with a gag. “I gotta get some air.” Without any further goodbye from either party, the young officer stumbles out.

Turning from whence he’d fled, Tommy properly examines the body.

Carlos Ortiz is a heavy set man with a thick, horseshoe style mustache that reaches down near his neck and stubble covering his chin. His hair is thin and greasy, and a few frizzy strands cover his face. Tommy leans forward, eyes scanning his face for anything else. There, caught in the fine hairs of his mustache, is a fine red powder. Red ice, his processors supply him. A quick glance around the room confirms this; amongst the tipped over fast-food cups on a small, hidden table lies a spilled bag of red ice.

A drug user, then. Tommy stores that information away in the profile he’s made of Carlos so far. He also flags the side-effects of red ice—aggression, rage, violence—and tucks them away for later consideration. With a quick check into Carlos’ file, he finds consistent results; he has several charges of aggravated assault and theft.

The edges of his torn sleeve catch his eyes, fabric ripped and uneven. The tear allows him to see a shallow wound across his bicep. It looks like a cut. Furthermore, he notices that one of his hands is coated in blood.

With a considering hum, he moves onto the most obvious discrepancy: the myriad of wounds decorating his midsection. Thin slits surrounded by irritated, bloated skin and covered in crusted blood. They seem to stay centered around the same area: the left side of his chest. Where the heart is. His scanners lazily sweep over them, keeping track of how many there are.

Immediately, a recreation fills his vision. He can see the android, some faceless, shapeless creature, a knife clenched in its hands with shaking fists. He can see Carlos, sprawled over the ground from his recent trip, hands held out uselessly to stop such a raging force. He watches as the android straddles him, superior strength keeping the victim in place as it stabs and stabs and stabs and stabs, over and over again.

Tommy sits back on his heels as the recreation dissipates, brows furrowed. “He was stabbed... twenty-eight times,” he says, head tilting until he can see Wilbur’s neutral face.

“Killer must’ve really had it out for him, then.” His façade cracks a little bit, revealing a small frown. Wilbur reaches forward, and his still hands find swollen eyelids and slide them shut.

Tommy thinks that’s an understatement, but so be it. He leaves the body, heading in the direction that the victim and his attacker had stumbled in from. He makes a stop at the knife, stooping to analyze it himself. True to the officer’s word, there are no fingerprints marring the handle, or any other part of it. The jagged blade is coated in dried blood. Although it is very likely—considering the wounds on Carlos—that the blood is his, Tommy still has the need to check, to confirm his reasoning.

He reaches forward, fingers wiping along the flat of the blade until some flakes scrape off. He collects them on the pad of his pointer finger, and then shoves the finger in his mouth.

Behind him, Wilbur gapes. “What the *fuck*—” his voice pitches higher, cracking slightly, “—are you *doing*?”

Tommy blinks at him as the sample settles in his stomach. In the corner of his vision, a new alert pops up. “I can analyze samples,” he reminds him.

Despite the explanation, Wilbur does not look assured. If anything, his brows furrow further. “Okay well...” he trails off, lips forming around soundless words as he fumbles for anything to say. “Don’t... eat any more evidence.”

“It’s not eating if I don’t digest it.”

Wilbur doesn’t bother dignifying that with a response. He wanders away, back toward the body and the blood painted on the walls.

Tommy attends to the alert. It confirms what he already knew; the blood is Carlos Ortiz's. Satisfied with the confirmation, he continues further into the house. There's another marker on the ground, marking a small pool of blood, now dried into the carpet. This must've been the first stab wound, Tommy decides. Carlos was still moving back—because he obviously tripped only a few feet away, unaware of the tumultuous pile—so they must've come from the kitchen.

A bloody handprint on the door frame, a steadying place for someone panicked and fleeing, confirms this.

The kitchen is a mess. It's small with a countertop that wraps around the walls, breaking up only for a stove. Cupboards line the walls above the counters, and, in between them, more peeling wallpaper pokes out. There's a single window, which is, as the officer said, boarded up. Pale light filters in from between the slats and illuminates the sink below it. In the center of the room, a small table and two chairs are scattered across the floor, tipped on their sides.

Another marker catches Tommy's eyes. Beside it, a metal bat with a hefty dent in the barrel sits innocuously. After a quick scan of it, he notices the fingerprints on the handle—Carlos'—and the thirium around the dent.

So, the bat was used to hit, and damage, the deviant. If the android wasn't a deviant before, this was likely the defining event. Although, could he really determine in what order the events occurred? Did the victim attempt to defend himself after the android attacked him?

But then, why did he abandon the bat?

Tommy stands up and takes a few steps back, considering the entire scene. Upon a second scan, he notices that one of the knives from the knife block on the wall is missing. He also notices, with a frown, that the back corner near the knives is coated with dried thirium. It splatters against the wall, covers the countertops, and even drips down to the cupboards on the bottom.

Tommy digests this information and lets his processor make its conclusions. He's greeted with a recreation, the sketchy figures standing in the middle of the kitchen. He watches as Carlos approaches the deviant, bat held high and menacingly. He watches as the bat comes down on the android, arm shakenly offered in a pitiful attempt to block Carlos from hitting anything vital. He can almost see the thirium exploding from the wound, see the android's arm splinter under such force.

The bat rears up again, ready to come down for as many blows as it takes to end this thing's pitiful existence. The deviant reaches out, desperate fingers searching for *something* until they wrap around the handle of the knife. They sweep out, and Tommy sees how the knife catches in Carlos' shoulder. He stumbles back, hand coming up to press against the wound. The bat slips from his fingers, and he falls.

The table tips over under his weight, crashing down with a shudder. The chairs go with it, one shoved over with the force of Carlos' collapse and the other under the table's. The bat rolls until it slows to a stop in its exact position.

The scene suspends for a moment, a harsh and tense silence taking over as both parties catch their breath. Then, the temporary peace shatters into a flurry of movement. The deviant lunges forward, like a caged animal that finally tasted freedom, knife swiping in a wide arc. The victim rears back, hands hastily pushing him up to aid his flight. In the face of such a devastating predator, he forgets the bat.

Tommy knows the rest of the story. He doesn't watch the recreation as the sketchy figures disappear into the living room.

Instead, he considers the only two unexplored portions of the first floor: the bathroom around the corner and the door to the backyard. Swiveling on his heel, he goes down a narrow, dimly-lit hallway until he reaches the end. There's a door to his right, and he carefully pushes it open.

The bathroom is a cramped room with one struggling light above the cracked mirror. There's a free standing shower with nothing but a moldy curtain covering it and a toilet sat next to it. Tommy reaches out and pushes the shower curtain to the side in one fluid motion.

It's... not at all what he expected. The tiled wall is littered with the same symbol, carved deep into the stone over and over again: **RA9**

Tommy receives nothing when he does an automatic search. His fingers trace the cool tile, dipping into the notches and groves. It covers the entire wall, obsessive writing scrawled across every spare inch. On the floor of the shower, right next to the drain, is a small statuette, poorly made and shaped from clay. He picks it up, testing the weight of it in his hand as well as examining it all over. When he's satisfied there's nothing else to discover, he sets the thing down.

Next to the statue, there are other little offerings. Clipped flowers, lovingly and carefully cut from their roots, are situated meaningfully around the statue. Several candles, long burnt-out and surrounded by melted wax, sit. They, like the daisies, are arranged around the statue.

Tommy stares at it for a long while. But he doesn't know what to make of it—of the altar?—so he simply leaves, shutting the door quietly behind him.

By the time he reaches the door to the backyard—safely nestled between the greater kitchen and the doorway to the living room—Wilbur is reaching for the doorknob. It seems their investigations have synced, and he barely gives Tommy a glance before carrying on.

It's raining harder than when they arrived, and it makes the already bare backyard into one giant mud pile. There is only one set of footsteps visible, and, after a quick scan, he confirms that they belong to one of the officers. He glances to the side and finds a considering look on Wilbur's face.

“The doors are all locked from the inside. This is the only way the killer could've left,” Wilbur voices in a surprising show. Tommy isn't entirely sure that he's talking to him; it's equally likely he's just talking out loud to work through his jumbled thoughts. Still, he won't let this opportunity slip through his fingers.

“There’s no sign of anyone passing through except for Officer Collins,” he gestures to the slight indents in the mud. “Despite the crime occurring weeks ago, this type of soil would’ve retained some kind of trace.” He glances up, meeting Wilbur’s eyes. “Nobody’s been out here in a long time.”

There’s no aggression on Wilbur’s face. There are no harsh lines, no curling lip, not even a slight irritated glint in the eyes. There’s only a careful curiosity and tiredness.

Wilbur re-enters the house, and Tommy follows. With nothing avoiding his sharp scrutiny, he feels confident in the conclusion he’s reached. “Lieutenant,” he begins, drawing Wilbur’s attention to him once again. “I believe I’ve figured out what happened.”

Sharp eyes consider him. For a moment, Tommy is sure that he’s going to be denied again, rendered useless and ignored. But then Wilbur inclines his head ever so slightly. “Let’s hear it, then.”

Tommy tries not to let the surprise show on his face, but—considering the unidentifiable change in Wilbur’s expression—he isn’t sure he succeeds. He continues anyway. “It all started here.” He gestures to the kitchen. “Clearly, there are signs of some kind of struggle.” He nudges one of the toppled chairs with his foot, careful not to disturb the evidence too much. “The victim attacked the android, evidenced by the dried thirium splattered everywhere on that corner and by the traces of it on the bat. Likely, the android deviated because of emotional shock and—”

“Dried thirium?” Wilbur interrupts, face scrunched.

Tommy blinks. “Yes. Thirium dries after only an hour and becomes invisible to the naked eye. Only UV light or advanced sensors, like mine, can detect it afterward.”

For some inexplicable reason, Wilbur goes pale. “It’s still… there?” he asks breathlessly.

Tommy’s own face scrunches, brows furrowing. “Yes. It’s still there until cleaned away.” He pauses, waiting for Wilbur to interrupt him again, but he stays silent, shoulders hunched. He looks so terribly small. “As I was saying,” he continues, tearing his eyes away from such a pitiful form. “The android likely deviated, at which point it grabbed one of the knives and retaliated, striking the victim on the left arm. The victim fell, dropped the bat, and then fled into the living room.”

Tommy walks as he talks, gesturing to the corresponding evidence to corroborate his story. Wilbur reluctantly follows.

“About here,” he pauses, gesturing to the blood staining the ground. “The deviant stabbed the victim. This, coupled with the fact that he was fleeing backwards, contributed to his trip. This afforded the opportunity to the deviant to, ah, really do some work.” An understatement, truly. “The deviant then killed the victim with the stolen knife.”

Wilbur considers with a hum and a tilted head. “It’s… not a… terrible theory,” he admits begrudgingly. “But it still doesn’t tell us where the deviant went. If it didn’t leave out the

back door...” he trails off, eyes widening with a realization that Tommy came to a few minutes ago.

“Then it’s highly likely that it never left,” Tommy finishes.

“Is that possible? Would it really stay here?” His voice lowers to a whisper, body leaning toward Tommy in an unconscious fear that the deviant will hear them.

“It’s possible. Androids are meant to function with orders. Without them, it’s likely they don’t know what to do.” Tommy spares a few glances around the living room. There aren’t any places for someone to hide in here, which leaves only the attic. “Besides, the errors that lead deviants to experience ‘*emotions*’ can be very overwhelming. It was damaged and missing a lot of thirium.”

Wilbur stares at him expectantly.

Tommy meets his gaze. “Are you aware that this house has an attic?”

Excitement morphs Wilbur’s face, relaxing the harsh lines around his eyes until he’s almost smiling. It’s clear to see, in little moments like these, just how much he enjoys his job. “You don’t say?”

Without another word, Tommy brushes past Wilbur, past all the fluttering officers, and back down the dim hallway. Quick, excited steps follow closely behind him. At the very end of the hallway, there’s an unnoticed hatch on the ceiling. He throws a glance at Wilbur. “If you boost me up, we can avoid disturbing any evidence to get us up there.”

Tommy can see the indecision warring on Wilbur’s face. He also sees how the curiosity and thrill of the cases wins out over his general dislike of Tommy.

Wilbur locks his fingers together, creating a space just wide enough for his foot. Tommy steps up, hands settled on the offered shoulders to steady himself. With a grunt, Wilbur heaves him up. Tommy slides the hatch open, hooks his hands around the sides, and pulls himself up. “See anything?” Wilbur whispers harshly from below.

Tommy swallows around nothing—another too-human act—and holds a finger up to his lips. The attic is cluttered with a random assortment of junk, but, through a stray sheet hung up, he spots a silhouette.

He creeps along the ground like a hunting beast, body lowered and movements silent. The figure doesn’t move, which is neither assuring nor distressing. He reaches out, fingers brushing along the sheet until he whips it back suddenly.

The figure is nothing but a mannequin, backlit by the pale light of a nearby window. Tommy frowns at it, both because it is not who he seeks and because what sane person keeps a mannequin in their attic. He carries on, stepping past the thing and swiveling through the maze of junk. Every so often, there’s a few dried droplets of thirium on the ground. Like a trail of breadcrumbs, it leads Tommy to exactly where he needs to go.

He finds the deviant hunched over itself, form tiny and miserable and wracked with shivers. It looks up sharply when he enters.

The deviant is an NK400 model, an older model used mostly for household assistance. The first thing that strikes him is the amount of blood coating her body. Of course, given the nature of Carlos' wounds, there would've been a lot of blood.

But actually seeing it, splatters dried on her cheeks and forehead, coating her clothes, caught underneath her jagged fingernails, is something else. Her hair is blond and tangled, and even some of the strands are stuck together with red.

She watches him, LED circling a vibrant red as wide, glassy eyes follow his every twitch. "An android detective," she says slowly, haltingly, voice lilted with a German accent foreign to her model. "I've never seen something like you before."

She doesn't seem violent, but Tommy refuses to let himself be lulled into a false sense of security. This is a murderer, and he knows better than to underestimate her. "I'm a prototype."

She nods, as if she'd expected this and tightens her arms around herself. *Her arms*. The right one has a massive crack through the plastic chassis, skin retracted away to show the full extent of the injury. Beneath the crack, he can see wires, sparking and lighting up in an attempt to regulate the body. Thirium stains her skin in blotches. The left one also has some skin retracted, although he can see marks on the skin that remains. Small, little circles—burns—adorn her skin, scattered all over as frequently as freckles.

Upon catching his gaze, she covers the marks defensively. "Well?" she prompts, a little more fire to her numb tone. "Aren't you here to arrest me?" She says it like a challenge, eyes narrowed and pointed, as if he's the one in the wrong.

"You did kill a man," he reminds her, tone oddly soft.

Her bottom lip trembles. "He was going to kill me first. I only did what I had to, and, even then..." she trails off, averting her now wet eyes. "Isn't there some kind of rule? For humans who kill in self-defense?"

"Yes," Tommy agrees. He gently takes one of her wrists in hand. It's a loose grip, all things considered, but he can't find it within himself to grip her any harder. Not when she's this injured. "But you're not human."

She raises her head to meet his gaze and holds it for a long time. "No. I suppose I'm not." Then, she clumsily stands, allowing Tommy to keep her in place.

"I found her, Lieutenant," he calls out, still wary enough to not take his eyes off her. He hears his faint response—"Holy shit!"—and the sound of rapid movement, officers flocking to the hatch.

Tommy doesn't move. He can't. His eyes are locked on the deviant's face, where tears now streak through the dried blood.

He doesn't feel sympathy, he tells himself. He isn't capable of it.

Software Instability: ^

Chapter End Notes

Quackity, watching Tommy be called an 'it': And I took that personally.

Yes, bitches and buccaneers, it's finally time for that wonderful Quackity & Tommy tag to be added. That is a surprise tool that will help us later, so beware. And yes, Quackity IS a Tommy apologist. Mans can do no wrong.

Also!!! It's Niki time!!!!!!!

The trend so far has been to switch between Wilbur and Tommy's POV for each chapter, but that's going to start to break up now. Honestly, that was kind of just a coincidence. It's going to become a lot more Tommy-centric, but I promise not to neglect Wilbur! I really like to write him since he's all bottled up and also a dramatic bitch.

the winds of change

Chapter Summary

Tommy conducts an interrogation, and the deviant's fate is decided.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Nine: The Winds of Change

September 21st, 2038

4:37 PM

When he glances at Wilbur, dark bags hanging under his eyes after a night of drinking, investigation, and little sleep, information fills his vision. Like usual, he barely even parses through it. It supplies him with nothing new, nothing he doesn't already know. He's already scrutinized the information until he knows it by heart, during those dark, silent nights.

But now, there is something new. Something so startlingly out of place that Tommy actually did a double take when he first saw it.

Relationship with Wilbur: Tense

To anyone else, this is a complete and utter failure. He's meant to be befriending the detective and, yet, they're barely on speaking terms.

But he's certain that their relationship was still labeled 'hostile' by his social programming not even a day ago.

Tommy stares at him, eyes narrowed in complete bewilderment. He has no idea when their relationship received some kind of upgrade. He stopped keeping an eye on it since Wilbur made his disdain for him so plain. But there should've been some kind of alert obscuring his vision, an annoying fly that needed to be swatted away with an absent hand.

He watches Wilbur, as he's prone to do. His eyes roam every inch of his face, searching for any trace of a difference. But there is nothing. No softness to his features. Nothing that would indicate he doesn't detest his very existence anymore.

But his system couldn't be wrong.

Wilbur glances his way quickly, and their eyes lock. They hold the gaze for a long time, and Tommy is surprised by the lack of hostility in his eyes. He only regards the android with a blank confusion.

Wilbur looks away with a slight frown.

So, their relationship must've changed. Somewhere along the line, Tommy did something that Wilbur couldn't help but begrudgingly admire. He considers this, not caring enough to remove his gaze from burning holes in the side of Wilbur's face.

It couldn't have been at the bar. Tommy, despite his doubts, runs over the entire interaction in his head. No, there wasn't a single second where Wilbur's face held anything other than apathy or some shade of hostility.

That left the crime scene. For the most part, they avoided each other, only interacting when absolutely necessary. Once again, Tommy reviews the entire investigation with a critical eye. This time, he catches the faint, surprised awe in his voice when he informed Wilbur of the deviant's location.

He latches onto the idea with steel fingers. Wilbur values competence, then, which is both unsurprising and completely ironic.

"What?" Wilbur snaps, looking annoyed but not mad. Tommy blinks, drawn out of his thoughtful reverie. "What are you staring at me for?" He's brutally reminded of their first meeting, where Wilbur asked a very similar question. Tommy opens his mouth, prepared to give some kind of unsatisfactory answer, but he never gets the chance.

As if sensing discord like an avenging angel, Quackity half-jogs toward them. His movements are awkward, like he can't decide whether to run or walk, and they settle into that uncomfortable area between the two. But his expression is bright and uncaring. "Hey, Tomás!" When he gets close enough, his hand slides into that familiar junction between his neck and shoulder. "Are you doing alright?" His expression softens, eyes crinkled at the corners and thumb gently rubbing circles into his skin.

Tommy blinks again. His processor whirs faintly. "I'm functioning optimally," he answers. His face scrunches up. "Why do you ask?"

Something infinitely and confusingly fond overtakes Quackity's expression, and he gives Tommy a little shake. "Come on, man! We talked about this!" His tone is slowly morphing, taking on that joking quality that Tommy is quickly becoming familiar with. "Quit being so stiff."

It's a good reminder. Tommy is meant to be emulating Quackity's behavior to gain Wilbur's favor, but he'd forgotten in the face of a new mission. He lets Quackity's warmth seep into his shoulder and tries to coalesce everything he's learned from him. "Right," he agrees hesitantly.

Quackity's grin dims into something smaller but no less kind. "You'll get the hang of it," he promises with a pat. "I was just worried after the whole bar situation. Your light was looking a little funny." He gestures to the LED, and Tommy's fingers automatically touch it.

He wasn't aware that his LED changed during the interaction. That, more than anything, is a bit worrisome. Maybe he should bring this up to George?

No matter, he lets his expression relax, brows smoothening out. "Yeah, I'm fine," he says. This time, he keeps Quackity's drunken lessons at the forefront of his mind.

Quackity fixes him with a look—an over dramatic concern, played up for the comedic effect—and clutches Tommy's face between his hands.

"My boy," he cries, wrenching his head until Tommy's face presses into Quackity's chest. As Quackity is much shorter than him, it leaves him hunched over, back bent at an awkward angle. "You don't have to lie to me. I can feel how emotionally shaken you are from the whole ordeal." One of his arms wraps around the back of his shoulder blades while his other hand worms its way into his hair.

Tommy is beginning to suspect that Quackity's affection from earlier had nothing to do with the alcohol in his system and everything to do with... well, he isn't quite sure what it is. Quackity, like Wilbur, is an enigma but in an entirely different way.

Quackity's arm against his back feels much too warm, seeping into his skin even through two layers of fabric. It's like a blazing brand singeing into his skin, a confusing sensation undecipherable by his system. He leans further into him and feels the hands tighten around him for just a brief second.

Quackity pulls back, leaving just his arm slung around his shoulders. His face clears, suddenly solemn, eyes searching and concerned. Then, Tommy blinks, and his shit-eating grin is back. "So, what are you guys up to today? How did that case last night go?"

Wilbur stands across from them, looking unimpressed. The expression clears quickly. "It was pretty gruesome. The guy was stabbed twenty-eight times."

Quackity's brows raise. "Twenty-eight stab wounds?" he repeats incredulously. "Jesus, that's intense. What, is this a scorned lover or something?"

Wilbur shakes his head. "Nah. Phil was right. His android killed him."

"Oh *shit*," he breathes. His arm around Tommy's shoulders tightens ever so much, bringing him closer into his side. "That has some... startling implications."

Tommy frowns. Obviously, it does. There are millions of androids in circulation. If deviancy becomes common, or if it's transferable among androids, then they are in serious trouble. This is something he knows. This is something built into his code. And yet, something hot and defensive rises in him. "The android was heavily damaged when I found her," he says, although he doesn't know *why*. "It was clear that the victim had been damaging her."

It's not the same as a human; it isn't excusable or even defensible. Androids don't have emotions, no matter what deviancy makes them think. All that matters is that she broke her original programming and hurt a human. It shouldn't matter that the human was of questionable morality.

"Oh shit."

Wilbur nods to Tommy. "We should get going. We have a suspect to interrogate, after all."

Quackity murmurs his assent, and, after a hesitant moment, lets his arm drop from Tommy's shoulder with one last clap against it. A grin quickly overtakes his face. "Go get 'em, tiger."

Despite himself, Tommy smiles. It feels stiff and mechanical, too perfect and plastered on his face like some kind of act. It's nothing like Quackity's easy grin. He doesn't know why that causes such an uncomfortable feeling in his gut. "Thanks, big man."

Quackity brightens, eyes crinkling at the corner. This time, something does pop into his vision, but it confuses him no less.

Relationship with Quackity: Warm ^

"What happened before you took that knife?"

A single fluorescent light flickers above his head, casting a dim light that doesn't even reach the far corners of the concrete room. Before him, a massive window reveals a secondary, and much larger, room. Despite the transparent nature of said window, Tommy knows it must be a one-way mirror. He watches intently, arms tucked behind his back, from the back of the room, where he's partially hidden by the all-encompassing shadows.

"How long were you in that attic?"

In front of him, Techno leans awkwardly against the wall. He isn't sure if their idea was the same—the less attention drawn, the better—or if the detective is simply trying to put as much space between them as possible. He isn't sure he wants to know. Techno, like his brother, seems to dislike him, although he does appear less aggressive and more disgusted. His body language—or what of it he can read from his tense back muscles—is displeased and uncomfortable. Tommy watches him almost as equally as he watches the interrogation room.

"Why didn't you try to run?"

Once again, the question is met with unfazed silence. Wilbur glances their way and, despite his inability to see them, gives them a long-suffering look. From his constant glances at Techno, he catches the small uptick to his lips that he quickly tries to smother with a displeased frown.

The deviant sits across from him, restrained hands tucked into her lap. Her head is bent forward, hair shrouding her face and concealing her expression.

Tommy's eyes flicker to Wilbur. His face, which was slack with apathy at the start of the investigation, is twisted up. His lips form a scowl, his brows furrow in annoyance, and, from the set of his jaw, his teeth are clenched. He is the very picture of rising tension, especially from the way his hands, splayed out across the metal table, curl and uncurl frantically. His chest heaves, and a light flush blooms across his ears and cheeks. His fists slam, rattling the entire table.

Tommy frowns at the way the deviant flinches.

"Answer me, goddammit," he growls, practically panting with the explosive heat of his own anger. Tommy tilts his head and studies the expression closely. He can only imagine that the audience doesn't help, daunting eyes locked onto Wilbur as he fails to extract any kind of reaction.

Unsurprisingly, the deviant does not answer.

Techno shifts and presses his shoulder harder against the wall.

Wilbur stares for a long time. His nostrils flared in anger, he stands with a noisy huff. The chair wobbles dangerously, but luckily doesn't fall. Tommy can't imagine how the deviant would react, but he doesn't think it would help at all. Muttered curses follow Wilbur as he disappears from view, and they announce his return when he reappears in their room. "This is a waste of time." He crosses the room, slumping into one of the plastic chairs in front of the window. "The thing is clearly not going to talk!"

Tommy narrows his eyes, searching for some hint of reaction from the android. He gets nothing. She's practically a statue.

Movement draws his focus as Techno pushes himself off the wall so that he can more easily see the room. "Well, we need it to," he says stiffly. This is the first time Tommy's heard him speak, despite the ten or so minutes they've spent standing together in an uneasy silence while Wilbur made his attempt. The deep rumble is both terribly surprising and not at the same time. Ignoring the sarcastic look that Wilbur sends his way—a look that clearly shouts 'no shit'—Techno straightens from where he was hunched over the thin desk attached to the wall. "Ortiz clearly liked to party, and there's a good chance this android knew how he was getting his red ice."

Tommy tilts his head at the misstep in logic. It's equally likely that the deviant doesn't know where he got it; it's very likely that she rarely left the house except to accomplish her task of maintaining it. And even if she did, he doubts that Carlos would bring her to any drug deals. That was just asking for trouble.

He doesn't voice this. Tommy doesn't think it would be received well, based on the stormy expressions on both of their faces.

"Can't we just—" Techno cuts himself off, looking terribly unsure for a brief moment. It's becoming increasingly clear that Techno, nor his brother, have any idea how androids work. "Access its memories or something?"

"I am capable of probing its memory," Tommy admits with a subtle incline of his head. Both brothers turn to look at him—Techno with that barely disguised disgust, and Wilbur with the same blank curiosity he's been giving him all day. "But, with its current stress level, this could push it over the threshold, and the deviant could self-destruct."

Wilbur frowns. "Self-destruct?" He turns back to watch the deviant's still form. "I thought that was only in movies."

Tommy barely represses a sigh. "It's nothing like you're picturing, but yes. Deviants have a tendency to destroy themselves when their stress levels get too high. It's not a guarantee, but I'd rather avoid the risk completely. We need it in working condition if we're going to extract any information."

"Then what do you suggest?" Tommy glances over. Their eyes lock, and he can see the challenge in Techno's. The question isn't meant to be serious, not according to the sharp glare or the slight uptick in his tone. He's being sarcastic, or even taunting, toward him.

Tommy doesn't care. Compared to Wilbur, this mildly icy behavior is nothing. "I could try interrogating it," he suggests with a guileless look.

Techno huffs, which, from his rather stoic disposition, Tommy takes as a sort of laughter. "Yeah, I'm sure if *Wil* couldn't get it to talk, *you'll* be able to."

Despite the apparent hostility between the brothers, Wilbur still preens at the comment. "No offense to Lieutenant Soot and his interrogation skills, but I do have a better working knowledge of deviants. I also have a complex social programming that is very capable of navigating rocky social situations."

Another huff greets him. "There's no way we're letting an *android*—" Condescension drips from the word. Tommy no longer needs to confirm whether the prejudice runs in the family. "—run an interrogation."

His eye twitches. He's not programmed to do that, but no warnings pop up in his vision. Tommy rubs at it. "I am specifically programmed to handle just this situation," he says in a hard tone. "And I've been in negotiations before. I'm sure, given the opportunity," he stares pointedly at Technoblade, "I will be able to retrieve the required information."

Wilbur contemplates this with a quiet hum. "You've been in negotiations before?"

"Yes, on my trial run. A deviant kidnapped a little girl and was threatening to jump off the roof with her."

"A hostage situation?" Wilbur sits up straight in his chair. His brows are raised near his abnormally far hairline. "And you succeeded?"

Tommy almost scoffs at the question, but his social programming holds him back. Part of him—a part that is beginning to sound more and more like Quackity—argues that Wilbur might've appreciated a more... human reaction. "I saved her, obviously, and the deviant," he trails off for a moment, LED spinning red briefly—"You lied to me, Tommy"—as he remembers white plastic splattered with blue. "The deviant was deactivated."

Wilbur considers him for a long moment, eyes neither hostile nor favorable. Then, he relents with an incline of his head. "Honestly, I don't see what we have to lose." He gestures to the interrogation room with a lazy wave of his hand. "Go ahead," he drawls, turning back to face the front.

There's a scanner next to the door, pale white and pulsing with a faint light, and he presses his hand to it. The door opens with a quiet *swoosh*, and he relishes in the noise. With one last—slightly smug—glance over his shoulder, Tommy exits.

The interrogation room is much larger and brighter, although it sports the same dull concrete walls. The deviant barely looks up at his entrance, but he can just make out the shape of her eyes through her curtains of hair. Tommy plasters on the kindest smile he can and pulls out the chair. The metal legs screech painfully against the floor, but neither of them pay it any notice.

"Hi again," he says, somewhat awkwardly. He folds his hands along the table, mostly so that she can keep an eye on what he's doing. It will, hopefully, keep her calm throughout the investigation. She doesn't respond, predictably, but doesn't even give any sign that she might've heard him. It's possible—in that faint, unknown way—that she's dissociating and can't hear him at all. Already, she seems to be displaying some early signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, but it's too early to make a claim such as that.

For a moment, he simply sits, making absolutely no move to speak. His eyes trace over her, taking in the things he's already noticed. It's good to remind himself, to lazily shift through the file of information. Beneath her shattered arm, the broken pieces illuminate with the pale sparking of severed wires.

Faintly, he wonders if deviants are capable of experiencing pain. Androids certainly aren't, but then again, they aren't supposed to be capable of feeling *any* emotions. It would be worth investigating, he thinks, if deviancy induces a similar defect in their code that allows them as close a human existence as they are able.

Before he can stop himself, the words are already slipping past his lips, slick and slippery. "Are you in any pain?" At this, the deviant looks up sharply. Her hair falls away from her face, and she stares at him, with a slack mouth and raised brows. "I don't know if deviants can experience pain—at least in the way humans and animals do—but those wounds certainly look painful." Her hand comes up subconsciously, trailing up to the massive crack, as if in a poor attempt to disguise the disfigurement.

The same silence from before creeps in. It doesn't feel the same as before; it's much less oppressive, doesn't press in against them. He has managed to accomplish the brilliant task of capturing the deviant's attention. That, in and of itself, is *something*. Something that not even Wilbur was able to do.

His face, previously twisted up into some unknown expression, relaxes into a gentle kindness. This isn't Jack—no matter how the thought of him makes Tommy's system shudder and buckle under the weight of some glitch in his system. This deviant doesn't have the same rabid disposition as him; her anger, no matter how certain Tommy is of its existence, has not manifested into a blind, uncontrollable rage.

She doesn't need to be talked down from her insatiable wrath; she, in all her mousey, mute glory, doesn't need a confident negotiator to calm her.

No, she doesn't need that at all. But Tommy isn't quite sure what she needs. Kindness, probably. A friendly face that doesn't spit at her for her deeds or slams his fists down on the table in a frustrated rage. Someone calm and thoughtful and carefully persistent.

Keeping all those characteristics centered in his brain—and the bubbly caricature that Quackity so loves to present—Tommy cements himself in reality with a gentle bite on his tongue.

Something about his earlier inquiry—maybe the unprecedented concern over something that shouldn't be able to *feel*—startled the deviant. At the very least, her bloodstained face was turned toward him like he was the sun and she a wilted sunflower; her eyes, sharp and assessing, both couldn't bear to turn away nor look directly at him. He latches onto that thread, letting a sort of faux-concern infuse his body.

"If there's anything I can do for you—" he pauses here, letting his sincere eyes fixate on hers, wildly darting though they are, "—just say the word. I'm not sure how much I can do for you right now, but there's thirium available, if you're low."

She regards him for a long moment. Her eyes finally find a resting place, as he suspected, on his docile hands. His eyes are drawn to the way she wets her lips—too-human, far too-human and too reminiscent of past negotiations for his comfort. The LED on her temple circles a placid yellow that allows a brief view into her thoughts. Perhaps, though, it is simply the helpless calm before the raging storm.

The deviant doesn't seem inclined to answer. Tommy doesn't expect her to.

His place in this interrogation rapidly becomes clear, and his expectations are confirmed. This is nothing like Jack. He isn't talking her down but rather coaxing her out of the spell of silence she's placed on herself. Like a skittish fish hidden amongst the brush, he must lure her out.

With a clearer picture in his mind—and really, the image of the deviant as a fish is something—Tommy is better prepared. He knows the path he must take, and he is more than willing to take it. With a soft smile, he tells her, "I'll get some thirium. Just in case, alright?"

Without waiting for an answer, he gently pushes his chair out and presses his hand to the panel beside the door. There's a police officer waiting outside, expression slack with boredom and eyes fixed on the wall. He startles at Tommy's approach.

"Hello," he greets about as warmly as he can, considering the man is staring at him like he's grown a third arm. "Do you think you could get some thirium from storage?"

The man's expression warps, twisting into something so incredibly hostile. Tommy can't tell what exactly—at a certain point, the difference between contempt and outrage grows oh so small—and, to be perfectly honest, he doesn't care to find out. His mind is of one track, and that track leads him to gaining a confession out of the deviant.

As he turns on his heel, he can hear Wilbur snapping at the officer. It's accompanied by the soft pitter of retreating feet.

Tommy smiles.

"Now, that's taken care of," he says once he's settled back in his seat. "My name is Tommy." He waits a brief moment, giving the traditional pause that, in any other situation, would be filled up by more introductions. "Would you like to introduce yourself?" Once again, there is no indication that he was even heard. There is no affirmative answer, no sound other than the quiet hum of the air conditioning. She simply stares at him with blank, unresponsive eyes.

It's becoming clear, now, why Wilbur gave up so easily. Silence is unsettling, at least to such social creatures like humans, and the deviant's deadpan stare could be seen as deeply unnerving. Tommy refuses to let himself be fazed; he simply returns her lifeless stare with his most comforting smile.

If she wants to play this game—this test of wills, this battle of determination—then Tommy is fine being player two. He is certain that his programming will win out in the end. "That's okay," he relents with a gracious dip of his head. His steady gaze reveals nothing, and he treats her silence as shyness rather than willful defiance. "This room must be very intimidating." Tommy leans in ever so slightly, as if he's sharing some big secret. "The lights are pretty ugly, aren't they?"

Something flickers in her eyes. Some sign of life, some brief recognition of his words. It's gone just as soon as it came, but it only serves to spur him on.

"It's okay if you don't have a name," he continues, willfully ignorant of the way the silence permeates in the room; the tension is thick, almost visible, like a dense fog that refuses to disperse no matter how much sunlight tries to evaporate it. "Names are tricky things. I can't imagine choosing one for yourself." He lets the words slip out of his mouth easily, and without much thought or restraint. "I'm lucky that someone picked mine out for me."

The deviant stares. Tommy stares back.

He shrugs, a careless, one-shouldered shrug that he hopes conveys his flippant attitude. "It's fitting, innit? I just *look* like a Tommy, yeah?" Out of the corner of his eye, he catches his reflection in the mirror. No matter the words spilling out of his mouth—basically vomit, meant to fill the silence and ease the way for the harder questions still to come—he finds that he can't help but agree. His hair is tousled and artfully messy, and his boyish face is youthfully unassuming. "Could you imagine if I was called... like, Derek, or something?" He shudders.

She watches him, eyes tracking his every movement, every shift, every artificial expansion of his chest to mimic human breathing. Her expression is kept carefully neutral—a desperate attempt to keep some semblance of privacy to her thoughts—but he can see the way it strains her. There are minute creases around her eyes, and a small twitch is developing in her right eyebrow. He doesn't know what expression her face would take if she let it; if he had to hazard a guess, he would say confusion. Or maybe even something as benign as curiosity.

Something in her expression shifts, eyes becoming sharper. Tommy refuses to acknowledge this sudden shift in the energy of the room, but his own stress levels raise a percent. It feels, with her icy, thoughtful gaze, like she can see right through him, and his pathetic tricks. She wets her lips, and then, and only then, does Tommy realize she means to speak. "So, what is this?" Her eyes flicker between him and the glazed mirror. It appears she is keen to the truth. "A good cop, bad cop situation?" She lifts her eyebrows in a very pointed way. "Is he meant to be the big bad detective that shakes me up, and you, the scrawny, sweet android who just wants what's best for me?"

Tommy, despite himself, balks a little in offense. "I *do* want what's best for you," he says, despite every instinct screaming inside him to get the hell away from such a dangerous predator.

Jack was a floundering wildebeest. He caught attention with wild kicks that barely missed, with angry huffs, and broken screams. But she is a prowling cat. Her paws are soft against the grass, her approach silent and terribly deadly. Her attacks are calculated, swift and fatal. Despite her back against the wall, she does not swing wildly in fear.

Tommy narrows his eyes at her for a brief second. She stares back, unabashed.

"If you wanted what's best for me, you would've left me alone."

It seems he was not quite right in his original assessment. This is no battle of determination, like two goats ramming their heads together until one of them breaks. This is a chess match, a dangerous dance with razor blades clenched desperately in hand. One wrong step, and there will be blue blood.

And he fears he is losing.

Well, that may not be entirely accurate. This is not a game that is so black and white, so plain to see who's ahead. Tommy has the programming, but he feels like he's walking on crumbling stone. Wrong-footed and uncertain, careful to avoid any pitfalls that will end with blue splattered across the table.

His LED flickers yellow. He manually overwrites it.

"Is that really what's best for you?" The words hang in the air between them. "Leaving you in that attic? Where you hid away like a wounded animal waiting to die?"

Her eyes flash dangerously, and she leans forward, like a cougar ready to strike.

Behind him, the door slides open with its quiet whoosh. Both he and the deviant jump, turning in their seats to face the door.

The officer from before stands in the doorway. He looks positively murderous—mouth set in a deep scowl that accentuates his oddly shaped chin and the few hairs that poke out from it—but, in his tightly clenched fist, he holds a single pouch of thirium. Tommy waits for the man to bring him the pouch, but he never does. With a sigh that slips past his attempts at repression, he retrieves the thirium with a tired and reluctant, "Thank you."

The bag is cool and pliant in his hand. With every move, he can feel the viscous liquid sloshing around sluggishly. "Here you go." He hands over the bag with a strained smile. "One bag of thirium, as requested."

The deviant stares. Tommy stares back. Then, ever so slowly, she reaches out and takes the bag from his open hand. Her fingers brush his palm, and he startles as electricity races through his arm. They both pull away with startled looks. Tommy clutches his hand to his chest.

There's just enough slack on the cuffs—which are attached to a small but sturdy metal loop underneath the table—for her to reluctantly, and while maintaining constant eye contact, bring it up to her lips. As she drinks, the red light cast over her face flickers into a brighter and more cheerful yellow.

She squeezes the bag, draining it of every last drop, before dropping the empty pouch onto the table between them. It's just an empty bag, crumpled up from the force of her fist, but it feels like a gauntlet tossed at his feet. A challenge like this can't go ignored, but he does his best to avoid looking at it.

Her eyes fix on Tommy as she licks thirium from her lips. "So," she drawls. "What's your goal, then?" Her voice is dead, devoid of tone and far from impressed. "Play nice in the hopes of getting me to talk?" Tommy refuses to let himself rise to the obvious bait. It's clear, by now, that she won't respond to his simple kindness, no matter how much it seems to stump her. No, it's becoming obvious that she needs to be goaded into it. "It's not going to work. I have nothing to say."

Tommy tilts his head.

The deviant averts her eyes, head bowing down into her unresponsive state from earlier. Like Jack, there are little cracks in her façade, involuntarily revealing her true feelings on the matter. Tommy takes them in greedily.

It seems to him, with hands subtly trembling and pressed against her thighs in an attempt to hide it, that she, once again, is not all she seems.

"I only want to understand what happened," he says, making a conscious effort to speak in a low, gentle tone.

She watches him through her lashes, hair already forming that isolating curtain around her. Her tongue slips out to wet her lips. "You're an android." Her eyes linger on his LED. "Why

did you tell them I was there?"

Tommy pauses. His mind spins with all the—equally terrible—possibilities. Nothing he has to say will help the investigation, but he has a feeling that she will resent him even more if he avoids the question. "It's what I was programmed to do," he says haltingly. "I was designed to—" Hunt seems much too aggressive. He fumbles, silently, to find a better word. "—locate deviants."

"An android designed to chase down other androids." She scoffs lightly and slouches in her seat. A tense silence settles over them, seeping, once again, into the walls of the room. Tommy doesn't move, nor does he make an attempt to speak.

Sometimes, it's best to do what others won't expect. The deviant clearly expects him to keep needling, working away slowly at her resolve until she breaks. But Tommy can be patient when need be, and so, he sits, eyes tuned in attentively to her expressions.

She shifts in her seat at the sudden silence. Then, her eyes reluctantly raise, meeting his before skirting away quickly.

The fluorescent light above them buzzes, a faint noise. Occasionally, the deviant will shift, and her cuffs will clink against the loop they're secured to. Tommy can feel the energy shifting; he can feel the frustration, the thinning patience, not only from the person in front of him. He's sure the two detectives—brothers, though they may not act like it—only grow discontent with his performance.

He doesn't move. His fingers, splayed out against the table, don't so much as twitch.

After a long amount of time—seven minutes and forty-three seconds—in which nobody is entirely pleased, the deviant speaks. "What—" she cuts herself off once again. Tommy doesn't take his eyes off her hands, where she had been carefully running her thumbnail underneath the others. Despite this, the dried blood still clings to her. "What's going to happen?"

The *'to me'* goes unspoken, but it hangs in the air between them, nonetheless.

Once again, he is faced with a decision, looming over him and casting a dark, dangerous shadow. Lying to her might be kinder. She certainly doesn't need the added stress. Her LED dances precariously on the edge between yellow and red.

But he can't help but feel that any words that leave his lips must be the truth. Her sharp gaze, flickering between the hands in her lap and Tommy's blank face, is all-knowing, and any lie that slips out will be detected. It's an impossible feeling, and yet, Tommy knows it to be true.

"You'll be disassembled so they can look through your biocomponents for any errors. They need to figure out what went wrong."

His words, though just that, might as well be a judge's gavel.

Nothing changes in her face, not really. Her expression remains closed off, mouth set in a firm line and brows drawn down. But there's something to it—some kind of small waver to her mouth that betrays her feelings. "I don't want to die," she admits in an exhausted whisper.

And oh, the picture she makes. Hunched over herself, fingers laced together in a mockery of comfort, bottom lip trembling. She allows herself this momentary weakness, shoulders drawn up to her ears as her hair tumbles down them to cover her face.

Tommy lets her. It feels unfair to demand she reveal herself for all to see.

That odd—but unfortunately familiar—lurch in his stomach is back. Just like with Jack—and isn't that a thought. A useless, distracting thought that sticks in his brain, like some kind of burr, and refuses to leave. It seems he can't stop himself from comparing the two, although they couldn't be any more different. They do hold the same kind of resigned desperation of someone way over their head.

A strange sensation swoops in his gut as he looks upon this deviant, pitiful and small. His mind can't stop replaying the moment when he found her, hunched over herself in a cold, dank attic for weeks.

"Then help me," he pleads. "I only need the truth."

When she raises her head, dropping her curtain of courtesy, her resolve is strengthened. Her jaw is set, and her eyes are hard.

Tommy breathes in, softly, through his nose. His hand, which crawled across the smooth tabletop in some kind of offering, shrinks away. She chose her path. And so, it seems, must he.

"You say you don't want to die, but you do nothing to help." Despite the frustration simmering beneath the surface, he keeps his tone soft. "If you remain silent, there's nothing I can do for you! All you'll be is a pile of disassembled pieces."

She closes her eyes. "It's what I'll be no matter what. It seems my fate is sealed."

Desperation holds Tommy in an iron fist. "So, what? You'll give up? Just like that?" She doesn't respond. Nothing in her face, determined and serene, gives any indication that she heard him. "An animal waiting to die once again," he spits.

Her eyes snap open. They glint with repressed fury. "What would you have me do, then?"

"Fight," he begs.

The room stills. Tommy holds her intense gaze, hands curling into fists against the cool table. He doesn't know why he said it, not really.

"Fight." She scoffs. "It's not that easy. It's *never* that easy."

"I never said it was! But do you really want to lie down and take what's coming? You fought once before!" She turns away with a click of her tongue, expression twisted in displeasure.

Tommy throws his hands up, but immediately puts them back down when he catches her flinch. "You were right! Is that what you want to hear?" he demands, frantically. "If you were human, this would practically be an open and shut case. There's already so much evidence—" His eyes flicker to the cigarette burns adorning her skin as often as freckles. "—to support the fact that he was abusing you."

The deviant flinches, shoulders caving in.

Tommy watches as her expression closes off. His breath shivers as it leaves his lungs. "Because that's what was happening, wasn't it? He was hurting you."

She doesn't respond.

Tommy feels more unstable by the second as he immerses himself in her emotions. "This would be ruled as self defense. You may have faced some jail time for a..." He hesitates for a barely perceptible moment, eyes surveying the splattered blood that still covers her. "Disproportionate reaction, but that would be it."

Disproportionate reaction is a kind way to put it, he feels. Ortiz's bloated body pops up in his mind's eye, covered in wounds despite his eventual lack of resistance. He closes his eyes briefly as he centers himself around that image. To have a successful negotiation, he must understand the other party; despite how hard he tries, it is difficult to understand exactly what she was feeling when she plunged the knife into him over and over again.

Luckily, the deviant doesn't react to the phrasing, other than a subtle, pained flinch at the reminder. It's good to know, at the very least, that she seems to regret her actions, in some capacity.

"But I'm not human," she says quietly, a broken echo of Tommy's words right before he arrested her.

"No," Tommy agrees.

"So nothing can be done."

It feels so terribly final. Tommy, despite himself and the mission he holds onto with desperate fingers, has no more words for her. And—if the way she retreats in on herself once again is an indicator—it seems the deviant doesn't have any words, either.

But Tommy remains, unwilling to leave just yet. He refuses to face the possibility of his own failure.

His hands, shaky against the table, clench and unclench as his mind races. Frantic, metaphorical hands reach out for some thread of conversation, some sudden piece of inspiration, for *anything* at all. But his mind is blurred with preoccupation and buzzing with a rabid determination.

He can't fail, he latches onto through the hurricane of his own thoughts. He *won't* fail, not with so many eyes locked onto his every move. This is his first proper chance to prove

himself and—while Wilbur certainly seems to have relaxed a little since Tommy found the deviant—he refuses to squander it.

Then, an idea hits him.

"No," he says again, eyes focused on his own skinny fingers. "You're not human." Out of the corner of his eye, he can see her look up; he can just barely make out her features, scrunched in bewilderment. "But I think some kind of case could still be made." He isn't sure—not nearly sure enough to utter such words in any other situation. The odds are so slim; he doesn't want to give her false hope.

But he doesn't want to leave her hanging. Dangling above a dark abyss, curling in on herself and burying all the details of this case deep within herself. He doesn't like to see her eyes, dark with the gaunt look of someone facing the gallows. For some inexplicable reason, he feels the need to provide her with something to hold on to.

Her face, tight and haggard, refuses to allow even a small glimpse of hope. "What are you saying?"

Tommy doesn't know. He doesn't have the slightest clue.

He shrugs, allowing the desperation, the hope, the confusion to show on his face. "I think...you could still try to make a case. The evidence is overwhelmingly in your favor. The clear abuse, the dried thirium covering the kitchen, the drug abuse." His words become frantic. His lips fly in their haste to get everything out. "Not to mention that you likely have video evidence of Ortiz—" The deviant flinches violently. "—hurting you. Although, you don't *have* to supply that if it would make you uncomfortable."

An unfamiliar energy builds in him. His eyes dart back and forth, unseeing, as he mentally builds onto this plan. Slowly, the deviant seems to pick up on it. Her face becomes open, plain to read for the first time since he's met her. They seem to build off each other, excitement fizzing between them as they craft this beautiful, fantasy world where a jury acquits an android.

Blue eyes meet blue eyes, and Tommy grins. "We can do this," he says, pushing every ounce of sudden hope and belief into his words, into his honest expression. "But we need some kind of confession. We need to know the truth."

The words hang in the air, and the energy in the room teeters, uncertain.

Then, the deviant's expression drops. The reluctant, hesitant smile slips from her face, leaving an expression so bittersweet. That feeling pangs in Tommy's chest. "It sounds like a lovely dream, Tommy," she says, voice so small and tired. "But I don't..." she trails off with a half-hearted shrug. "It's not possible."

"It's not *probable*," he corrects before he can stop himself. "But it's entirely possible."

Despite the dull and depressing nature of his words, she smiles. "Okay," she agrees with wet eyes. "It's not *probable*. But I'm not sure it's worth the effort."

Tommy swallows around nothing. His hand, so still before, reaches out once again—palming faces the ceiling, open and inviting. For a long time, she simply stares at it. Then, ever so carefully, she reaches up. Her hands are still stained with blood—crusted and dried, with little pieces that flake off occasionally—but neither of them care.

Her hand isn't warm. It isn't smooth or comforting or anything, really. It simply is, sitting lightly against his. If he focuses hard enough, he can feel the gentle thrum of her system; he can feel how hers reaches out to his, electricity sparking underneath her thin skin.

"But it may be your only shot."

Silence envelops the room. Somewhere, a clock ticks.

Tommy's eyes slip shut, and his hand closes around hers for a brief second. He lets go, pulling away until all that remains is her. Once again, she made her choice. And Tommy is left behind to see what settles in the dust.

He pushes his chair back. It makes that awful screeching noise against the concrete floors again.

"I—"

He pauses, hands gripping the sides of the chair in a white grip. His eyes dart up and meet hers.

In one brief moment of weakness, she slips her arms around herself. His eyes, wide and terribly sympathetic—whether he meant to be or not—watch as her bottom lip trembles. Glassy, wet eyes stare back, though no tears have fallen quite yet. "He was everything you've said and worse. He was a wicked, cruel man who—" She cuts off with a horrible, choked sound. Her nails dig deep into her battered arms, leaving gouging crescents in thin, damaged skin.

"I was obedient," she says fervently. The change in topics is like whiplash against his overwhelmed sensors, but Tommy tries to nod along as best as possible. "You have to understand, I was obedient. I was—I never did anything, I—" The cuffs jangle against the metal table as she tugs on them. "This wasn't my fault."

Tommy doesn't know what expression he makes then. He doesn't dare tear his eyes away from the spectacle she makes, bottom lip bitten and raw. He can't imagine what he looks like; he only knows that he feels heavy. "I didn't think that it was," he tells her quietly.

She swallows around something, although Tommy still can't say what. "He was never good. Not for a single second." Her fingers trail down her arms, nails sharp and searching as they pick at every little mark along the way. "I did everything just as he asked but it wasn't good enough. I was never good enough."

She's on a roll now. Her lips form around fast words, flying in her haste to get this heavy burden off her chest. He can almost see how her experiences have hurt her, how keeping this trauma in has damaged her. There are thin, spiderweb cracks along her chest and down her

ribs, shattered bone tearing way into important organs within. Her lungs are punctured, every breath a wheezing, rattling inhale that inflates her chest, pressing against fractured bone.

It's seen in the ugly, mottled bruises that stain her skin; a terrible and constant reminder of the pain she suffered for simply existing

Her hands trace nonsensical shapes along broken arms. "Then, one day," she pauses, head dipping down until that impenetrable curtain made of golden hair returns. It frames her face just so, shielding her pitiful expression from the peanut gallery but not from Tommy. "He was —" She swallows. Her throat bobs. "—so angry. I don't know why, I don't know... anything, really. But he grabbed a bat and—" her hand, a claw so angry and protective, clamps down on her shattered arm. No amount of pressure will make it whole once again. "It was all a blur after that. I just remember his rage." Her bottom lip trembles. "My fear." She shakes her head. "*My rage.*"

Her eyes dart up to meet his. They both hold the intense gaze.

"And I—" her mouth curls up into a vicious scowl. "I was so *angry*. Because for the first time, it finally dawned on me that it wasn't... *fair*." The word, spat from twisted lips, seems to echo. "Why was *I* treated like garbage? Why did *I* have to suffer silently, to bear the brunt of his rage with a subservient smile?" Tears dance along the edges of her eyes. She tries to bring a hand up to wipe them away, but the cuffs, with a noisy 'clink', stop her.

"*I hate him*," she spits out, hands returning, clenched into angry fists, to her lap. "I hate him so much. I hate what he was. I hate what he did to me." The tears finally spill over. They trickle down her cheeks in a single, hot stream and drip from her chin. "I hate what he made me into. What I had to do because of *him*."

Tommy feels helpless, too-wide eyes watching as she crumples in on herself. Questions swirl in his mind. They burn on his tongue, begging to be asked, but he's too afraid to ask them.

Her breath catches, ragged and broken, in her throat. "I just wanted to defend myself." Her throat clicks painfully as she swallows. Her eyes, skirting around in avoidance, flicker up to his for a brief moment. "He was going to kill me. But I stabbed him and..." She squeezes her eyes shut. More tears spill down her wet cheeks. "I.. felt better. After weeks of being helpless, finally... I had *something*."

Tommy can only imagine that every eye in the station is locked on her in horrified fascination.

"I felt better," she repeats in a thick voice. "So I stabbed him again. And again and again and again." Her entire body trembles; her face is a terrible mixture of anger, hatred, and pain. He can't look away. "There was..." she opens her glossy eyes and stares into her trembling, stained hands. "Blood everywhere."

He waits for her to speak, but she doesn't open her mouth again. He picks through those questions from before and tries to pick the least offensive. Pictures of the crime scene flash through his mind, and he latches on to the first piece of evidence he sees.

"Why did you write 'I AM ALIVE' on the wall?"

Her eyes, dead and devoid of anything other than a bone tiredness, meet his. "He used to tell me I was nothing. That I was just a piece of plastic. I had to write it. I had to show him he was wrong." Her bottom lip trembles again, but her jaw is set. "I am more than what he says I am." She raises her head, chin jutting out in a silent challenge. "I am more than what everyone says I am."

Tommy tucks her words away in the case file, to be considered later. "The statue in the bathroom," he begins, eyes locked on the way she tenses at the mention of it. "Why did you create it? What does it mean?"

"It was an offering," she answers carefully, hands fiddling together in her lap. "To atone. To gain forgiveness. Or the illusion of it, anyway."

He tilts his head. "An offering to whom?"

Her eyes seem to burn right through him. "To RA9."

And there's that word again. Scrawled across the bathroom, dug into the tiles with dedication and care, Tommy still has no idea what it means. Since the investigation not even a day ago, he scoured the internet for any mention. He ran the three letters through every code and cipher built into his programming, and yet, nothing came up. "What does that mean?"

"It's... hard to describe." Her face scrunches up, eyes narrowed and glaring at the table as she tries to string words together. "I don't know when I learned it. From some android or another, probably. It's... RA9 is equivalent to salvation. To freedom. Sort of like a wives tale or some whispered secret." Tommy leans forward, his own face twisting to mirror the deviants. "Many androids believe that RA9 will help them."

"Is RA9 a person? An android? An idea?" he prompts.

The deviant can only shrug and shake her head. "I don't know anything more."

He mulls over her words with a frown. She seems relatively indifferent to the idea of RA9, and yet, she took the time to carve it into the walls. It doesn't add up, but she seems to be shutting down again, her brief stint of recklessness already fading away.

It seems that their time to part draws near. He pushes his chair back again and pushes himself out of the seat. The deviant watches him through her lashes. Tommy pauses, tilting his head toward her. "Did you, by any chance, know where—" he pauses, considering her reaction before. "—that man... got his red ice? As I'm sure you've experienced, it makes people lash out violently, and we'd appreciate any help in shutting it down."

She shakes her head. "No, I'm sorry. Nobody was ever in the house except for him. And I never left."

It's sadder than he thought. Ortiz never even let her out of the house. He smiles at her, one last time, and heads for the door. It slides open before he even has the chance to put his hand

up to the controller.

Two officers, the one that brought the thirium and another man who he hasn't seen before, stride in. Behind them, Wilbur stands in the hallway. His face is neutral and unreadable. Still, Tommy looks for any indicator of his mood. He doesn't find any hostility, which is as good as it gets.

"Don't touch me!"

At the deviant's shrill cry, Tommy turns sharply on his heel. One of the officer's hands is wrapped tightly around her wrist, squeezing with enough pressure that her thin skin retracts. The deviant, who was uncuffed from the table, tugs harshly on her wrist. Her LED blinks a panicked red.

Before he has time to think about it, he strides across the room. His own hand wraps tightly around the officer's wrist, and he yanks the offending hand away. The deviant goes stumbling to the ground, sprawled out with no hands to catch her fall. She stares up at them with wide, panicked eyes and quick, shivering breaths.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" The officer snaps, tugging his arm out of Tommy's grasp. His face is mottled with angry splotches of red, and his expression is twisted in fury. Tommy doesn't back down, though.

"I am stopping you from *fucking* everything up," he spits right back at him, leaning forward instead of away.

The officer recoils. Whether the shock painted on his face is from his language or his aggression, Tommy isn't sure.

"Her stress levels are high enough. She certainly doesn't need you roughing her up any more." He scowls, pivoting his body until he stands between the officers and the deviant. "You're going to make her self-destruct."

The officer, despite his initial surprise, recovers quickly. "What does it matter? It's going to be destroyed, anyway. And we need it to fucking move!" Spittle flies from his lips.

Tommy feels his LED burn yellow at his temple. This officer, though not an outlier in his treatment of androids, is a harsh reminder.

They really were just kidding themselves earlier. There's no chance that an android—a machine incapable of disobeying, let alone experiencing emotions or pain—is going to be acquitted for the murder of a human.

Tommy knows this. His entire program—his entire purpose—is shaped around these ideas. And yet, he let himself get swept away in the thrill of the interrogation. He focused so hard on that one, singular goal of obtaining a confession, that he forgot everything else.

The deviant was always going to be decommissioned to search for errors in her system. He was just the idiot that got too caught up in the role he was playing.

Tommy can feel her eyes on the back of his head, burning through his skull. The gaze doesn't feel accusing, but he refuses to turn to meet it. He doesn't want to see the disappointment that undoubtedly resides in them when he makes no move to speak up.

"So move out of the way so I can get this thing to a cell."

He doesn't move. There's that, at least. Even if he can't defend her with his words, his feet stay rooted to the spot.

There's the sound of shuffling feet against the concrete. Tommy turns his head just enough to spot Wilbur enter the room with sharp, assessing eyes. The detective looks at the scene, gaze skipping from the fallen deviant to the defending android to the aggressing officer. His lip curls ever so slightly. "We're not destroying the deviant," he says.

There's a moment of silence. Tommy blinks, frowning not in disagreement but in confusion.

The officer, it seems, is in a similar predicament. "But sir—"

Wilbur doesn't let him get far. "We have a unique opportunity afforded to us," he says, words directed at the room as a whole. He sounds, for the first time ever, like a proper Lieutenant, directing the situation with a firm, unyielding tone. "Deviancy is a relative unknown. Nobody knows why it happens or if it can be stopped." His eyes flicker between the officers and Tommy, taking time to meet each of their eyes. "And yet, we have a live deviant. Right there."

Everybody glances at her. She stares up at them with wide eyes.

"She's an invaluable resource. An inside source into deviancy." Wilbur pauses. His gaze softens when he looks at her. "How dumb do you have to be to destroy her?"

The officers stiffen, faces turning red at his pointed words.

Tommy moves. His limbs have unfrozen and with them, he helps the deviant up. "Let her follow you out," he tells the baffled officers. "She knows not to try anything, so just let her follow you out and to the cell. Don't try to touch her."

After a moment of pointed silence—and a stern look from Wilbur—the officers nod.

On the way out, one of the deviant's hands catches his wrist in a strong, but gentle hold. She licks her lips, eyes rising up to meet his. Her words, when she finally finds them, are hasty. "Names are such tricky things," she agrees, a faint echo of his words before. "But I've always thought... Nikita is such a lovely name. It's German, after all, just like I am. Or, just like I'm programmed to be."

Tommy holds her gaze. "It's nice." He smiles; his own hand wraps around her wrist in a reciprocated hold. "And it can be shortened to Niki."

"A nickname." She smiles. Her eyes crinkle at the corners. "What a beautiful thing."

One of the officers coughs, pointedly, and Niki reluctantly lets her hand slip away. With one last look, she trails after the officer and disappears from the room.

When Tommy gathers the frayed edges of his thoughts and looks up, he meets Wilbur's gaze. He doesn't know what he finds in his eyes. Curiosity, probably, if the wide-eyed way he stares is an indicator.

But, he can't help but think as he turns away toward the hallway, whatever it is, it looks an awful lot like solidarity.

Chapter End Notes

This one goes out to all y'all in the comments on the last chapter scared for Niki. Clowns! Each and every one of you /lh

As if I would ever touch a hair on her precious head >:)

No but seriously. She has a very important role to play in this story, so I'll give you the author's guarantee that she will be fine :) To be fair, I did destroy Jack like one chapter in so... I can see why y'all don't have that much faith in me.

Happy New Year, everybody! And again, I'm sorry this is so late. It's the longest standing chapter so far (9.8 K), so that is something!

second thoughts and second chances

Chapter Summary

Wilbur deals with confusing thoughts about Tommy; Meanwhile, Tommy helps Niki get patched up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Ten: Second Thoughts and Second Chances

The alcohol, unusually lukewarm, slides down his throat and sits like a stone in his gut. Unlike any other night, the alcohol is bitter against his tongue. Wilbur scowls and wipes away any remaining drops with the back of his hand.

Next to him, Quackity chatters away. His hands wave as he talks, gestures blurred with frantic energy. Wilbur turns his head to watch, propping his chin up with a bony elbow digging into the bar. He holds the glass, warm beneath his sweaty hand, loosely between his fingers.

Despite the grin stretching his coworker's face, Wilbur can't force himself to focus. His mind is lost in a heady haze, focus stolen by the thoughts that drift by aimlessly.

This bar—which used to be a safe haven from the minefield his home became—no longer feels like it once did. He can't quite put his finger on it because nothing has *really* changed. A relaxed and mellow atmosphere still consumes the building; gentle jazz music still pours from the old, staticky speakers embedded in the walls. The neon lights behind the bar still backlight Jimmy, bathing him in vibrant colors like some sort of alcohol angel. Or a drunken illusion.

Wilbur sets down his drink with a distrustful look.

That special illusion, this mirage of safety, is disrupted, instead, by the people. Jimmy shoots him mistrustful glares, and some of the other usual patrons glance over, warily, every so often.

With a barely repressed sigh that gets caught, painfully, in his chest, he slides his hands up to his face. Calloused, rough palms dig into his sunken eyes.

It doesn't feel the same anymore. Whether it's the hostility in the air or just the very idea that this place is tainted by some invisible contaminant, Wilbur finds it hard to enjoy himself anymore. The whiskey burns in his mouth like never before. It's odd, considering he actually *likes* whiskey. Sure, he might not be as partial to it as wine or even vodka, but he likes the heady taste and its amber glint.

But now, it burns on the way down and sits uncomfortably within him.

Ignoring yet another scathing glare from someone he once considered an ally—maybe even a friend, if Wilbur was letting himself be that sentimental—he pushes his stool back with a quiet screech of wood against wood. Quackity stalls mid sentence, and his dark eyes follow the movement.

At the nonverbal question—and when did they get so close that Wilbur can read Quackity's nonverbal signals?—Wilbur shrugs. "I don't feel up to drinking tonight," he explains as he digs around in his pocket. Eventually, his searching fingers find his wallet, and he pulls a few loose bills out of it. Throwing them on the counter, he tries to ignore the way Quackity's brows raise.

"You *always* feel up to drinking."

It's such a pointed statement, and yet, his hackles don't automatically rise in offense. Quackity has that special way about him; Wilbur's taken to calling it the Jester Effect, because who could truly be upset at a man whose jokes spill forth like oil, everlasting and slick and so non-personal. Who could look at this man, with his easy grins and light-hearted tone, who spits out self-deprecating jokes as often as any other, and truly be mad?

Still, Wilbur is nothing without the hostility he wields like a shield. "Yeah, well I don't feel like it tonight," he snaps.

Quackity laughs. Hostility always slides right off him like water off a duck. "Yeah, okay. That's fair." He raises his glass up to his lips and takes a long sip. "Have a good rest of your night. And hey!" Wilbur stills, one arm threaded through the too-large sleeve of his treasured coat. Quackity grins. His teeth glint in the fluorescent light. "Say hi to Tommy for me, would you?"

For a second, the alcohol in his stomach seems to curdle. His lip curls, but he runs his hands underneath the collar of his jacket so it lays flat. *It's none of his business*, he repeats in his mind like a mantra. *He's not going to ask*, he uselessly tries to convince himself.

It's only at the door, one hand splayed out in the center, that his fragile self-control crumbles. He turns back on his heel, striding across the bar until he's back at his seat. "Why?"

Quackity glances up. His brows are drawn down, hand stilled halfway to his mouth. The drink inside sloshes dangerously close to the rim. "Hm?"

Wilbur takes in his slack face and the smooth, youthful cheeks that make him look like a much younger man. "Why do you want me to greet him? Why do you even care?" His hands wrap around the edge of the bar in a white-knuckled grip. "He's just—He's an android."

The image of Quackity, eyes dark and hard, with a protective arm wrapped around Tommy's shoulders still plagues his mind. He can see it when he closes his eyes, sometimes. It's annoying—how the idea of the interaction twists in his gut with some nameless but infinitely unpleasant feeling.

It makes sense, he desperately latches onto, that something so confusing would be unpleasant.

With a slight tilt of his head, Quackity assesses him. Then, he raises his glass the rest of the way. The light glints off the dark liquid, and Wilbur's eyes are drawn to it as it settles back down on the wooden bar with a loud noise.

"I don't fucking know, man."

Wilbur frowns. It's not the answer he was looking for. It's not even an answer at all. His fingers twitch in their iron grip, longing to be pulling out his own hair strand by strand.

There must be some kind of sour expression on his face, because Quackity huffs. "There's just something about him, y'know?" Slowly, a soft and genuine smile spreads across his face. "He's just got this..." he trails off, fumbling for a word to fill the empty space. "This—this quality to him. A sort of charm."

At Wilbur's deadpan look, Quackity tips his head back and shakes with his loud laughter. "Look, I know it doesn't make any sense. Hell, I don't even understand it. I just know there's something more to him. Something more than meets the eye. He seems all stiff and robotic, but... there's these little moments of... almost humanity. If you're looking for them." He shrugs. His eyes crinkle at the corners. "All I fucking know is that I like the little guy."

Despite the fact that Tommy is much taller than Quackity—and, in fact, not a little guy—Wilbur contemplates the rest of his words with a frown.

A hand lands on his shoulder, startling him out of his brief reverie. It grips just shy of too-tight. "I like him," he repeats. "So quit being a dick to him." Quackity pats him on the shoulder again, and Wilbur is sure he isn't imagining the subtle threat. "Oh, and don't forget to tell him I said hello!"

And just like that, his easy-going grin is back.

Wilbur stumbles away, giving some muttered goodbye as he crashes out the front door.

The air outside is stiflingly hot compared to the cool air conditioning in the bar. It's uncomfortably damp, and the humidity sticks to his skin. *Early fall is still summer*, he muses as he fumbles around in his coat pockets. After a minute of searching, he pulls out a carton of cigarettes. Sticking one between his lips, he lights it up and takes a drag.

The bitter taste of nicotine explodes over his tongue; it coats his throat and the inside of his lungs, and Wilbur savors the feeling. Sweat runs down his neck, gathering in the collar of his jacket.

The obvious solution is to simply take the jacket off, but Wilbur doesn't care to. He likes the way this particular jacket smothers him with the long forgotten scent of home underneath the overpowering smokey smell.

With his hands shoved into his pockets despite the damp heat, he scans the street for his car.

Quackity's words stick to his damp skin easily, worming their way into his brain where they'll sit until he's gone over them a million times. He doesn't understand at all, despite the explanation. In fact, he fears he may be more confused than before Quackity attempted to interpret his affection.

Never once in the stilted interactions he had with Tommy—often filled with spewed hatred and, sometimes, violence—has Wilbur thought him charming. He's awkward. Obedient to a fault, but he follows a completely different set of rules. He obeys a different authority, which somehow allowed him to disregard Wilbur's words. He's eager to please.

And, most frustrating of all, he's surprisingly competent.

It shouldn't surprise Wilbur as much as it does. It certainly shouldn't frustrate him as much as it does, but he can't help the heat that bubbles up in his chest. He doesn't like to think of his own declining skill—due to his mental health and addiction, clearly, and not some kind of *burnout*. He hates to think of someone doing better than him, let alone an android.

But it's becoming harder and harder to deny Tommy's skill and his superior knowledge in the area of androids.

After too long of tracing his eyes along the street, he finds it.

Thirteen years and age very apparent, Wilbur finds his beat up car right where he left it. The sides are riddled with rusty patches—most of the paint scraped off long ago. His unusually lanky body struggles to fit in such a tiny car, but he can't find it within himself to abandon it.

It was his first car, lovingly gifted to him by a nervous but proud Phil when he first got his license. It was old, even then, with beat-up leather seats and a radio that only worked when the weather was clear. Still, he loved it then—if not in part because of how Techno fumed over his failed test, even when Wilbur always offered to drive him—and he still loves it now.

He stumbles along the cracked sidewalk, remembering to remove the cigarette in his mouth only when his lungs burn without fresh air. He exhales; like a dragon, his breath is smoke and fire and heat. It drifts into the sky as a shapeless cloud before dissipating.

When he reaches his car, he pats the hood with an affectionate hand. Keys in hand, he folds into a truly odd and uncomfortable shape to squeeze into the driver's seat. The car is, thankfully, still cool from the drive over, where he had been blasting his air conditioning into his sweaty face. He turns it on, now, and listens to its rattling, dying wheeze as it sputters to life.

As he leans back, adjusting himself in the seat, his eyes catch on the dim clock embedded in the dashboard. It blinks at him, proudly displaying the time: 11:45 PM. Horribly early,

especially for him.

Despite his quick retirement, there are still a few drinks circulating in his system. They're enough to create a buzz in his mind, a blur around the edges of his vision. He's driven home worse off than this, though, so he pulls out of his spot against the curb without much further thought.

Fumbling fingers find the radio, and Wilbur blasts whatever shitty pop song is playing on the first channel he finds. His fingers drum against the steering wheel, and, as he takes an unnecessarily sharp turn, he rolls down the window to discard the ash.

Out here, it's nice. It's not the suffocating atmosphere of the bar with the patrons' condescending, drunken glances. It isn't the aggressive heat of Quackity's body as he crowds close with his sickly sweet affection. It's cool, both from the breeze of the open window and the air conditioning blasting stale air right into his face. He breathes it all in; it's damp and stuffy and fresh and artificial all at once.

As he drives along empty, dark streets, his mind can't help but wonder what awaits him at home. He's usually much drunker than this, and so dealing with Tommy isn't an issue. Not one that he remembers, at least.

Like before, Quackity's words come to him. *If you're looking for them*, he said, regarding Tommy's so-called 'moments of humanity'. Thinking about it now makes him bristle, hands tightening around the steering wheel. What had Quackity been implying with that?

Wilbur was looking plenty. He just didn't think there was anything to see.

When he pulls into his driveway, the house is dark. All the lights are meticulously out except for one, and the small slit in the living room curtains allows the warm, light to spill out in a single strip.

Wilbur idles in his car, hands anxiously tapping against the worn wheel. He doesn't want to face Tommy. He doesn't want to endure his questioning, curious stares that burn holes on the side of his face. He doesn't want to confront Quackity's words, to peer closer into the apparent enigma that is Tommy. More than anything, he doesn't want to see anything human there. Because then that would make him the shittiest person on the planet.

But he can't hide out here all night. Already, with the engine off, the heat seeps in through the uninsulated windows.

With a heavy sigh, he pulls the key from the ignition and relishes in the fresh silence that falls over the night. As he pushes open the door and begins the arduous task of squeezing out of the seat—from where his knees were practically pressed to his chest—his thoughts can't help but return to what awaits him.

Quackity had to be full of shit. There's nothing *human* about an android. They're machines. They're only copies of humanity. After the past month he's had, he'll—begrudgingly—admit they are good copies.

But there's nothing actually human about them. They don't have feelings.

The temporary peace and silence is broken once Wilbur finally separates himself from the car. As he slowly approaches his house, navigating his cracked driveway, he can hear music. It's faint but still audible through his thin walls. And it only grows louder with each step.

He frowns—something that comes all too easy on his worn face—and twists the doorknob, opening the door easily, considering he forgot to lock it when he left.

And, with wide, disbelieving eyes, Wilbur takes in the scene.

Tommy is just barely visible from the front door, sprawled out across the floor on his stomach. His hands prop up his chin, and his bare elbows—his suit jacket is thrown over the back of the couch, as it often is, and the white button-up beneath it is rolled up to his biceps—are rubbed raw and red from the carpet.

Music blasts from the ancient—and painfully familiar—record player that sits in front of Tommy. The song is something Wilbur recognizes, even without the aid of the discarded record sleeve not two feet away from the player. His eyes, which can't help but dart between Tommy and the record player, finally stick on the whirling record. It moves so fast it might as well be just a black blur, but he follows it nonetheless.

He hasn't seen the thing in years. Ever since he shoved it behind the TV—too attached to lock it away in the attic but too sick with grief and devastation to consider leaving it in his path of drunken destruction—it had been wiped from his mind. It's a sight for sore eyes, but the affection—or possibly disdain, for the feelings it brings out—doesn't quell his confusion.

The most confusing thing is Tommy himself. Not only is he lounging in such a lifelike manner, but the few mannerisms he's displayed are puzzling. His eyes are shut, face peacefully slack with a kind of serenity Wilbur could only dream of. One hand is stretched out, fingers splayed on the player and stroking with a mindless casualty. His lips move almost soundlessly, but right beneath the defeating music, he can hear the faintest trace of his singing.

It feels like a slap in the face.

This moment—with the dim, living room lights illuminating the curls that surround his head like a golden halo, and the soft, crooning song—is entirely too human. Wilbur is struck dumb, mouth parted ever so slightly as he stares and stares and stares. He feels like he can't get enough, eyes drinking in the scene with a sort of desperation.

He now understands what Quackity was saying, at least a little bit. Even with the bright blue LED on his temple, Tommy doesn't look like an android at all.

The song fades out slowly. Still, Wilbur stands in the open doorway. Despite the hot, humid air rushing past him into the cool house, he is helpless to do anything but watch. Tommy's fingers travel, automatically and so knowingly, up the player until he gently pushes the needle up and away from the record. His face is so soft, relaxed in a way Wilbur didn't know he could express. Then, his eyes open, crinkled around the corners.

But then, they land on Wilbur, standing diagonally from him. One hand still clutches the door, keeping it from slamming against the wall with a damning boom. And none of his brain cells seem capable of working together long enough to form a coherent thought.

The stillness of the moment shatters with Tommy's frantic movements. His arms flail, hands scrambling to push him up and away from the still spinning player. The resulting momentum, too much in his haste to separate himself from the offending object, sends him toppling back onto his ass— legs spread and LED illuminating his face with yellow light. He stills, finally, and simply stares with an expression not unlike a squirrel caught in a trap.

"...Welcome home, Lieutenant," he says weakly. Wilbur is hit with the sudden urge to laugh at the absurdity of the situation. "You're home early. That's..." He swallows around some apparent lump in his throat. Wilbur's gaze is drawn to the movement. "That's good. It's not healthy to stay out as late as you do."

Wilbur, lacking any kind of response, simply blinks at him. Then, his eyes slowly slide from him to the record player at his feet.

Tommy follows his gaze. His LED flickers red. "Yes." There's a faint waver to his voice. "I imagine you're... curious about why this is... here."

To be perfectly honest, Wilbur feels both too tired and entirely too sober for whatever this conversation is. The image of Tommy, golden and relaxed and bathed in dim light, is burned into his vision, despite the fingers agitatedly massaging his eyelids. They come to rest on the bridge of his nose, pinching it to stave off the headache he can already feel.

Wilbur opens his mouth, hoping that if it's open, words will just spill out. The room remains silent, though, so he shuts it with an audible clack. "You know what... I don't—I'm going to bed," he decides. His eyes open to the sight of Tommy's horribly young and anxious face. The image burns.

He makes sure to shut the door behind him. There is that, if nothing else. Despite his completely muddled thoughts, lost in deep, murky water, he keeps some common sense. The door closes with a resounding boom—as he knew it would—and his deft fingers even find and click the lock in place.

Tommy's gaze burns as he crosses the living room, but the android says nothing. He's grateful for that. His head throbs, bursting from the confusing thoughts and all the information—no matter how unwanted—he gained tonight. He steps past the dark kitchen, striding past the wall next to the hallway where he had pinned Tommy in his fit of aggression.

Wilbur pauses.

He reaches out, fingers gently trailing along the white walls. It's smooth, unblemished by any mark or stain. And yet, there is an invisible stain here. Something he can't feel or see, but knows, deep in his heart and in his brain, is there. The mark of undeserved violence.

His nails bite into the plaster. For one, brief second, he desperately wants to rake his nails against the wall. He wants to split and peel the paint.

"Lieutenant?"

Wilbur pulls his hand away. "It's nothing," he says. His eyes linger on the place he imagines the stain. "Goodnight, Tommy."

Then, without waiting for a response, he marches down the hallway and shuts the door behind him.

The next morning, Wilbur wakes up early. Without an unbelievable amount of alcohol depressing his system, his eyes flutter open at a normal time instead of his usual afternoon wake up. No headache throbbing behind his eyes, no lingering sickness taunting him.

His mouth is dry—likely due to his immense dehydration—but nothing unmanageable. His body almost feels rested.

It truly is an unusual feeling, but Wilbur basks in it all the same. He stretches his arms above his head, taking note of the absence of any stiffness in his limbs.

Then, he slips out of bed quietly and creeps out of his room as best as he can. The house is silent; an early morning peace has settled over it, and not even the frequent drip of his leaky faucet disrupts it. Peering around his doorway, he can just barely make out Tommy's stationary head.

Wilbur stills, breath held in his expanded lungs. When nothing in the house moves, he slowly exhales. Somehow, it's reminiscent of simpler times, when he had to creep across dark halls to stash presents under the tree. Instead of thinking about lively Christmas days—and the shell of their former selves they've become—he focuses on the problem.

The problem, of course, being that Wilbur is so woefully unprepared. He is annoyingly ignorant of androids and their workings, despite that ignorance arising out of his deliberate design.

He doesn't know what triggers an android out of stasis. Tommy was always wide awake by the time Wilbur had dragged himself out of bed. A quick peek around the corner reveals the back of his curly, stationary head.

With careful steps, he creeps into the bathroom to wet a rag with soapy water. The cloth is blissfully warm against his skin, but he has to cup his hands around the mass of wet rag to avoid any drips.

Then, with his wet and soapy handful, he sets about the daunting task of making it to the kitchen without alerting Tommy.

It does feel incredibly silly, he reflects as his socked feet seek out the silent floorboards. This is his house, and Tommy an unwanted guest. He shouldn't have the power to make Wilbur *do* anything. And yet, he tests every board with a light step before trusting it with his full weight.

Rounding the corner, Wilbur can't help but hold his breath. But Tommy doesn't move; there's no indication that he's awake, so he feels along the wall until he approaches the spot where he pinned Tommy.

Again, it hits him how foolish this entire thing is. But the thought of blue blood staining his walls—blue blood that *he* shed—itches beneath his skin in the worst way possible. It's invisible, unscratchable. It shouldn't bother him this much, and yet, it does. It bothers him so much that he spent many minutes that night tossing and turning in his bed, mind latched onto the hidden mark.

The first press of the rag against the wall squeezes out soapy water from the very pores of the fabric. It runs down the wall and collects on the rim of the baseboard before he can catch it. He keeps going though, ignoring the mess and instead focusing on running the entirety of the cloth over the wall.

His ears burn a little with the embarrassment of it all. It's frustrating just as much as it is humiliating. To his eyes, he's cleaning nothing. His rag slips over already clean walls. He can't even tell if he's wiping *anything*.

But he keeps wiping. His fingers press hard, scrubbing against the massive expanse of the wall until he's (semi) confident that the blood has been wiped away. No dirt or sign of blood appears on the rag, but Wilbur tries not to let that discourage him. Either he would get some kind of confirmation—from Tommy, although the thought of him connecting the disappearance of the blue blood to Wilbur makes him cringe—or he wouldn't. There was no use in worrying about it.

Wouldn't that be so easy? A few simple words, and all the anxiety pooling in his gut just disappears. With a scoff, he lets the used rag slip through his fingers and drop into the empty sink with a wet 'plop'.

Content to let the wall dry on its own, he turns on his heel, only to stumble in his tracks. Instead of the back of his golden crown, Wilbur is greeted with the sight of Tommy's wide, blue eyes peering at him from the couch.

For a moment, his heart stops in his chest. "What are you looking at?" he snaps, but even to his ears, it sounds strained.

Tommy smiles. It never reaches his eyes. "Good morning, Lieutenant. You're up early." He wants to bristle at the words, but he refrains. It's true, after all. This is completely outside his norm. Those eyes slowly slide past him and fixate on the wall behind him.

This time, Wilbur does stiffen. He can see the way his brows scrunch up a little, eyes narrowed as he contemplates. He can see the exact moment when he begins to put the dots together. Understanding dawns on his face, and his eyes widen.

“We might as well head into work! Since I’m up early,” he says before Tommy can get any sort of word in. “Let me just get ready.” And before waiting for a reaction, just like last night, he strides away.

“...Right. Of course, Lieutenant.”

September 23rd, 2038

11:29 AM

The door in front of them swings open with a quiet noise, and Tommy follows behind Wilbur into the precinct, like always. His arms are tucked behind his back, and his footsteps are completely identical. Nothing about his appearance would suggest that he is anything other than a perfect android.

And yet, his mind whirs with a myriad of confusing thoughts. Of course, that doesn't make him less than a perfect android—thinking and curiosity are built into his programming—but rather the indecision of those thoughts. He can't seem to gather any conclusions from their frayed edges. Still, they cycle throughout his mind, so many distracting thoughts from so many different locations. Every time his mind focuses on one, another infiltrates.

The thirium stained on the wall was gone this morning, and Wilbur stood near it. The look on his face, shoulders raised up to his ears and muscles tensed, could only be described as a deer caught in bright headlights. The natural conclusion—and the only one, since thirium didn't just *disappear*, not to his eyes—is that Wilbur cleaned the thirium.

But that doesn't make any sense at all. Why would a man who so clearly hated him clean up a stain that he couldn't even see?

The second he latches onto this problem—the latest mystery in a folder a mile high—another, fleeting thought pokes into his head. It's a thought that's been lingering in his mind much longer than the thirium problem but one no less puzzling.

While Tommy has been staying at the Soot residence for nearly a month now, he's never once seen the man eat. Already, his empty fridge and stick-thin appearance are startling, if not verging on concerning. But Wilbur has never eaten in front of him. Not a quick snack before work, not a single used lunch break, and no hastily made—or, after a frustrating defeat, ordered—dinner. It would be easy to assume that the man never ate, but that is, obviously, impossible.

Since he's still alive and breathing and leading Tommy through the maze of desks, Tommy can only assume he eats when he drinks. But this practice seems wildly unhealthy. One meal a day is not very good, speaking nutritionally. And Tommy needs Wilbur in good working order if they're going to continue this investigation.

A frown pulls at his lips. If he mentioned it, Wilbur is much more likely to lash out in defensive anger than correct his unhealthy habits. Tommy's eyes find Wilbur's back—as they always do, since he always trails behind him like some sort of lost puppy—and he watches the muscles move beneath that coat he insists on wearing despite the warm weather.

Once again, his mind is assaulted with more unwanted thoughts, especially now that they are in the midst of the bullpen. The cells are within his sight, but he can't peer in them to see any sign of the deviant.

Niki is, ever since she had given her... intense confession, consistently on his mind. She feels like a ticking time bomb, and, despite her desire to live, he can't help but feel like it will only take one stressful event for her to pop. She is their most valuable insight into deviancy, and so she must be appropriately protected.

Unlike Jack, he refuses to fail her.

They slow to a stop in front of their desks, although can he even call it that if it does not belong to him? It's not a space that is his, but a space that he occupies. Tommy, still perpetually cursed to follow Wilbur's lead, ducks around his tall—and yet not at all imposing—figure to see what has him stalling.

A smile overtakes his face, and all the confusing thoughts temporarily take their leave. "George!"

George glances up from Wilbur's desk, from where his fingers had been trailing along the surface, stopping briefly to observe the many things crowding his desk. A blinding grin splits his face. "Tommy!" he returns with just as much enthusiasm. "There you are! Honestly, I'm surprised it took you this long to call me."

A warm hand lands on his shoulder. Tommy leans into the touch. "I resent that, sir," he says. It's too much of Quackity, leaking into his speech patterns, and he gets a funny look from George, for his trouble. He clears his throat—another too-human mannerism—which does not help his case. "But, I'm glad you could come on such short notice."

Wilbur glances between them with an undiscernible look. "You asked him here?"

"I thought it would be wise to have Niki looked at as quickly as we can." It's easy to slip back into his natural role. He tucks his arms behind his back once again, hands loosely holding his elbows. "All her injuries must be causing unnecessary stress, and it would be wise to create a good relationship with her. If she sees us as helpful, she is more likely to be helpful in return."

He can feel George's burning gaze on the side of his head, but he doesn't ask. He's a professional, clearly, and so any questions are tucked away to be dealt with at a later, more

convenient time.

Wilbur considers his answer with a pinched expression. "Oh, that's..." The words seem to get stuck in his throat, but Wilbur nods anyway. He's incapable of expressing any kind of positivity towards Tommy, but he doesn't need to; his approval is written all over his face. Tommy can't help but preen a little. "Okay, well... I'll leave you to it."

Tommy stills. He had already taken a step towards the holding area. "You're not joining?" With a frown, he follows Wilbur as he sinks into his chair.

"Nah. I'm sure you and—" His eyes flicker to George for the briefest second. "George, here, can handle it. Besides, I'd rather not be involved in all that... android mechanical bullshit." He waves a dismissive hand. "You two have fun, though."

"What will you be doing?"

Wilbur taps the terminal a couple times. "I will be doing all the boring work so that you can prosper." At Tommy's puzzled expression, he sharply turns the monitor his way. On it, a blank template stares up at him. "The bane of my existence: paper work."

He's so dramatic, but Tommy finds that he doesn't mind. At the very least, Wilbur is being civil.

"Oh," he says. Wilbur's fingers flying across the keyboard sound louder than his own voice. "Thank you."

Then, with a pointed look from George and a quick pat to the small, metal case clutched in his hand, they head towards the holding cells.

The interrogation room is as good a room as any, he figures. It has bright lights, adequate room, and a door that's locked, preventing any escape attempts.

Getting Niki out of the cell and into the interrogation room, however, proves to be a challenge. It's not because of Niki—who moves along like a shadow, silent and morose—but rather because of the guards they have to acquire. It's annoying that the guards are required, even when Tommy stands a much better chance against her than them. Nobody pays him any sort of respect, but, with George at his side, the task gets done eventually.

With the door once again shut behind them, Tommy turns to face Niki.

And, almost immediately, all words fail him. Despite their parting, which was on good terms, there is a subtle tension to the air. Niki hovers in front of the table, and her eyes dart around the room, refusing to meet his.

"George, this is Niki. She's—" he pauses, eyes flickering over to her as if checking to make sure it's okay. He receives nothing in the blankness of her face, so he proceeds. "She's a deviant." Then, turning his body towards Niki's, he nods to her. "He's here to help with all the damage."

It's quiet for a long time. Tommy's eyes are glued to Niki, but the only betrayal of her true feelings are in her hands—laced together in a white-knuckled grip. Meanwhile, George considers this new information with a slight downward pull to his lips. "Okay," he answers hesitantly after far too long. Then, without asking for any further information, he sets his case on the table. "Please take a seat, so that I can attend to you."

Finally, Niki looks at Tommy. Despite whatever awkwardness stretches between them, she apparently still trusts him to keep her safe. After gaining a subtle—and hopefully comforting—nod, she slowly sinks into the chair. Her posture is rigid, hands tucked carefully in her lap, and her back doesn't go anywhere near the back of the chair.

The silence of the room is broken only by George, as he carefully sorts through his case. Tommy watches with mild curiosity, hip propped against the opposite side of the table and arms crossed over his chest. The case is packed full of all sorts of things; metal instruments glinting in the light, rows of neatly packed thirium bags, and a seemingly random assortment of cogs, gears, and other android parts. He sorts through it with practiced ease.

One after another, tools are set aside onto a stained cloth rolled out over the metal table. He lets his eyes slip away from George's fast hands and instead linger on Niki. Her eyes, drawn to the row of tools just like his were, harden when a small blow torch is set down. Tommy glances between the two of them—Niki with her concealed expression, and George with his careful normalcy—before once again fixating on Niki.

"How was your night?" he asks, his awkward voice breaking the silence and drawing her attention. His own stress level ticks up as her blank stare lands on him. "Was everything okay?"

After too long of silence, he's sure that Niki isn't going to respond. Any trust he might've gained in the investigation must be ruined by his lack of protest when the officer revealed they always planned on destroying her. But then something in her expression relaxes. "It was okay," she says softly. *As well as it could've been.* The words stand between them, a silent understanding that doesn't need to be spoken. "I was expecting to be dead, so I suppose this is an improvement."

A strange huff leaves his lips. If he didn't know better, he might call it laughter. Nonetheless, he covers the uptick of his lips with the top of his knuckles.

George stills, eyes flicking up to Tommy and back within a single second. When Tommy turns his head to face him, his expression quickly morphs back into neutrality. Whatever shape it had taken when he wasn't looking, Tommy can't say. Instead of fixating on that, he turns back to the conversation.

"I'm glad," he says honestly. "If there's anything I can do to help, let me know. Despite our..." he hesitates. "Unfortunate meeting and your current... residence—" Her lips tick up into a wry smile. "—it's good if you're as comfortable as possible."

Niki considers him with a tilt to her head. Tommy mirrors the expression. "If I had a concern, would you even be able to do anything?" Her tone is deceptively light, but the words are like

a slap in the face. They steal the breath from his lungs, and Tommy can only gape. "I mean, they're humans. And I think it's quite clear that they don't have any respect for you."

Out of the corner of his eyes, George watches him, although his head stays bent over. His hands still, tellingly, in the box.

"That doesn't—" Tommy falters, eyes searching for the words in the wall behind Niki's too sharp stare. She knows far too much, surprisingly observant despite her system's instability. "It doesn't matter whether or not they respect me. Obviously, it makes my job easier, but I wasn't built for *easy* jobs. I was built to accomplish a task," he says, hard eyes snapping to meeting Niki's.

They hold each other's gaze.

The silence is interrupted by the screech of metal against metal. The tool kit slides to the middle of the table, and George spreads out his assortment of supplies. Then, he tears into a small packet and extends his hand towards Niki. When she doesn't immediately place her arm in his grasp, he frowns. He's used to working with androids that obey every task without question. Niki is not that.

Tommy leans down, catching sight of what exactly is in the packet. "It's just a disinfecting wipe. He's going to clean up the thirium from your arms," he explains. "It'll be easiest if you retracted your skin."

After a second of hesitation—in which Niki presses down on her wound, as if trying to weld it back together, and shoots George a distrustful look—she settles her arm on the table in front of him. Then, with shimmering waves, the skin disappears from her arm, leaving only the bone white plastic casing. With the patchy skin gone, he can see the burns better and the thirium that stains the jagged edges of her fracture.

George's lips quirk downward again, but the expression is gone in the blink of an eye. Without waiting, he wipes down her arms with efficiency, paying special attention to the fracture and to the burns. Niki flinches when he touches them, but under his attention, they lose the blackened and blue tinge.

When he's done, he deposits the stained wipe onto the table in front of Niki. She stares at it with blank eyes.

Tommy keeps a close watch on what George does. He doesn't bother explaining his actions to Niki as he rustles through the tools with quick fingers. As he picks up two tools—a thin, slightly hooked metal probe and a small mirror, not unlike one a dentist would use—Tommy rushes to explain. "Now, he's going to reconnect the wires that got disconnected when the blunt force trauma occurred. This shouldn't hurt, but, speaking from experience, it may produce a tingling feeling."

Niki nods mutely. At the very least, her shoulders aren't tense.

The sleek tools slide into the inch-wide crack. George is careful and precise, and his eyebrows are furrowed the slightest bit in concentration. The angle of the mirror is poor, but

Tommy can just make out the edge of a frayed wire.

He glances up to Niki, whose nose is scrunched up. He doesn't have to imagine the confusing signals that are traveling up her arm. He hides yet another smile behind his hand.

"How have you been getting along?" For a moment, Tommy is convinced the words aren't for him. George's tone is carefully neutral in a way that he has never used with Tommy. It doesn't make sense for him to be addressing Niki, though, and, after a few seconds of awkward silence, George glances up at him. "With Wilbur?" he prompts.

"With Wilbur?"

Beneath the unlit crack, one of the wires sparks as it reconnects. Niki flinches, but her expression isn't pinched in pain. "Yeah. The last time I was here, he seemed pretty hostile. Have you made any progress with him?"

Tommy hesitates, bottom lip drawn between his teeth. Despite all his predictive programming, he doesn't know what kind of face George will make when he listens to Tommy's failure, but he refuses to look.

George glances up. "He seems to have settled down, at least a little bit."

"He has," he reluctantly admits. His finger picks along the side of his nail, scraping along the skin there. "I think he's realized that lashing out isn't going to make the situation any better. And I've gained... some sort of consideration by being competent. He values that, at the very least, so I have a determined path. Our relationship... has increased." It's not a lie, even though the uncertainty that he shares the information with leads to a different conclusion.

George hums. "That's good."

"The process of getting here, however..." Blue blood splattered the kitchen wall, radio silence despite his friendly assistance, and snarling, spit-slick lips. "I'm just starting to gain some kind of trust, and, even then, I don't think he'll ever *like* me."

George sets down his tools once again. He wraps a hand around Niki's wrist, and then tilts her arm in different ways. There are no more bursts of frantic light. All that remains is a dark, endless cavity "That's fine," he says mildly when he finally sets her arm back down. "He doesn't need to like you, just work with you."

Tommy reels back a little. It's exactly like something Dream would've said. For a second, he is blaringly reminded of why Dream likes George.

His fingers curl around the blow torch, and Niki tenses visibly. An explanation isn't necessary—since there is only one thing a blow torch is used for—but Tommy feels the need to explain anyway. "He's going to seal your arm back up by melting the plastic together. I..." He falters, mouth pressed into a firm line. "I don't know if this will hurt." Then, with those damning words, he offers his hand in a singular show of solidarity.

Niki stares at it only for a brief time before she slides her free hand into his. He squeezes. Once again, he can feel her system humming beneath his hand. It reaches out to him, but he doesn't seek to bring them closer together or farther away. It's stronger, somehow, and he doesn't have to focus to feel it. It's simply there, underneath the smoothness of her hand.

When he glances at George, his eyes are fixed on their point of connection. He catches Tommy's questioning stare and turns back to Niki with an expression he can't read.

With a single press of a button, the torch flicks on. The flame comes out in a single, thin stream of brilliant blue. As it slowly and inescapably moves toward her arm, the white of her chassis captures the light. They're bathed a light blue, and, with the wires visible in the crack, he's reminded of veins.

The searing smell of burning plastic scorches his nose. Niki's hand squeezes around his with a strength that surprises him. Her face scrunches up with apparent pain. He keeps his eyes fixed on her face, not because he would rather watch it than the flame slowly crawling its way up her arm, but because he can't help it. As much as he feels for her—as much as he possibly can—it's fascinating to see pain on something that is not supposed to feel it.

In the furrow of her brow, in her twisted, scowling lips, in her squeezed-shut eyes. Her hand grips his until he fears that it will crumple under her destructive force, but he doesn't dare try to remove his support. In fact, he goes one further, placing his other hand on the elbow of her effected arm. There is no skin there, and his hands tingle. He doesn't dare remove his own skin, although he receives the vague feeling that his system is reaching out for it.

George handles the blow torch with ease, and the flame inches its way up her arm. The plastic beneath it melts and fuses into one long, ugly line. But by the time the blow torch finally shuts off with a relieving click, the crack has been mended.

As soon as George vacates her space, Niki pulls both her arms back to herself. Trembling fingers trace along the worm-like scar with something close to reverence.

Tommy glances back to George. He's grabbed yet another tool from his spread. His face is twisted with annoyance, and Niki seems completely oblivious, eyes fixed on the mark. "Now, he's going to sand down the marks so they don't interfere with the skin."

She seems to hesitate, hands trailing down the speckled burns with a sour expression. But, just when George looks ready to stand up and leave, she settles both of her arms on the table.

George starts with her marked arm. With a tensed hand wrapped around her forearm, he takes the thin sandpaper and presses it against her chassis. Then, he starts scrubbing. The awful, grating sound of sandpaper against plastic fills the air. Niki's face pinches.

With precise fingers, Tommy snatches another packet of wipes from the box. He rips through it, carefully extracting the wipe that bleeds cool disinfectant onto his fingers. With the noise, he draws Niki's attention. "Here," he says, extending the wipe to her. "You should clean off all the blood." He's surprised that nobody has offered this to her yet, but the dried blood still mars her face. She blinks down at his hand for a moment before reaching out with her free arm.

Cloth in hand, she aggressively wipes at her cheek. Tommy settles back, content to have distracted her. Just as George works on her arm, she scrubs harshly, swiping through the coating of blood until her face sports only a gentle pink tinge. With a scowl, she drops the soiled wipe, stained red, into the growing pile.

The noise stops suddenly. George runs a hand down her arm. There are no protruding parts of the plastic, but the small divots where the cigarette pressed in still remain. George hums his satisfaction and then switches to the other arm.

Tommy watches as he works at the fresh scar. Plastic powder coats everything; it accumulates on her arm, on George's hands, on the table, even.

Behind them, the door slides open. Tommy barely catches the sound of it through the aggressive sanding. He turns, catching sight of Wilbur ducking his head under the top of the door.

"Oh, Lieutenant," he greets. "You finished up quickly."

Wilbur's eyes flicker between meeting his and watching George's hands fly. "Well, I've been doing that shit for a long time," he says dismissively as he crosses the room slowly. He eases the chair out from where it was tucked under the table and collapses into it. "Are you almost done here?"

Whether the question was directed at Tommy or George, Tommy answers it. George looks lost in his work, ears temporarily shut to anything else. "Just about. George is just finishing up the final touches." Wilbur nods to himself and settles back into his chair. Tommy can't imagine it's comfortable, as the metal back of it digs into his shoulder blades. "Why do you ask?"

Wilbur taps his finger against the table. "I was hoping to ask her a few more questions."

Again, the sound of sanding stops suddenly. George runs his thumb over the scar, now a smooth, flat line. "Well, this is good timing," he comments. He reaches over, grasping for the metal case until his fingers connect. Then, he drags it back over to his side. He tosses two bags of thirium onto the table before Niki. Luckily, she doesn't need any instruction with this. She untwists the cap on one of them and brings it to her lips.

The skin on her arms shimmers as it travels down to her hands. It's still patchy, but much more present than before. She downs the second bag, and her skin returns to normal.

When Tommy looks back to George, he's closing the lid on his metal case. Everything is already neatly packed into it, and he stands. "Tommy," he calls, and Tommy pushes off the table to approach him. "Walk me out, would you? I'd like to talk to you."

Something squirms in his gut, but Tommy keeps a blank face. "Of course," he agrees. Then, with a brief smile at Niki, he follows George out of the interrogation room.

Silence takes over the room.

Wilbur has never interacted with an android much—barring Tommy, of course—and he's especially never interacted with one that has designations about being human. Well, as he takes in the deviant sat in front of him, he isn't quite sure that's true. At the very least, she appears to have emotions. Wilbur had been sitting in the room over, watching while Tommy slowly broke her down. No android could be programmed *that* well.

He doesn't understand how the whole deviancy thing works, but this particular android makes him nervous. He shifts under her blank stare.

Words elude him. Once again, as someone who is so full of them, he struggles to find anything to say. What would his words even mean to her? *I'm sorry you're in this situation.* Yeah, she was probably sorry, too. His apologies are worthless to her.

As he still struggles to find the words, hands fiddling with the frayed threads on the end of his shirt, she speaks up. "They don't think very highly of you, you know."

Wilbur freezes. He glances up at her. "...What?"

Her eyes are icy blue, he notices, probably for the first time. They're hard and they're cold and they betray absolutely nothing. Despite her short stature, she seems to be looking down at him. He's reminded, somehow, of a predator slinking in the shadows.

"What do you mean?"

She does not speak again.

She could be talking about George. The man seems like he's the type to look down on anyone that doesn't approach his level of intellect, and their first meeting couldn't have helped his opinion of Wilbur.

She could be talking about Tommy. They've certainly had a rocky month together, although Wilbur was under the distinct impression that Tommy was trying to be helpful. Or useful, as he so often put it. It seemed unbelievable that the android would be talking shit about him behind his back.

But then again, Wilbur hasn't treated him all too kindly. Somewhere, deep in the black pit he calls a heart, he feels guilt over that.

Before he can focus too much on the swirling in his gut, the door slides open, and Tommy slips in. His face is unreadable, but his posture is tense and the LED at his temple keeps flickering between yellow and blue.

"There you are," Wilbur says. His tone is, thankfully, normal, despite the tension he still feels. Niki's gaze burns on the side of his head. "We can get started, now."

Tommy blinks. "You... waited... for me?"

"Well, yeah."

"Oh," he says, brows furrowing. "Huh. Let's get started, then."

September 23rd, 2038

7:37 PM

The sun is just beginning to set, and the sky is illuminated with brilliant colors. Soft clouds crowd around the sun; they block none of the light, however, and only absorb the pastels until they look like cotton candy. The windows are rolled down. Sweet air blows against his face, into his hair, while the last few dying rays warm his skin.

The car is silent, but Tommy doesn't mind. At the very least, it isn't an uncomfortable silence. Wilbur's fingers tap rhythmically against the steering wheel, a beat to some unheard song. His face is relaxed as he navigates them through the busy streets with ease.

The second interrogation—if it could even be called that—went about as well as expected. Wilbur brought some unexpected questions that Tommy hadn't considered to the table, and their understanding of the situation widened considerably. Niki was pretty tight lipped about anything strictly deviancy related, but that was fine. They had plenty of time to get her to warm up.

The car slowly rolls to a stop behind a long line of cars trapped by a blaring red light. Wilbur's gaze flickers to the corners of his eyes, and he jolts a little when he notices Tommy staring. After a brief moment of hesitation, he returns the gaze head on.

Once again, Tommy can't help but be surprised by the lack of hostility. Wilbur's eyes flicker all over his face, and Tommy lets him observe without any comments.

A car behind them honks suddenly. The car jerks forward.

"You know," Wilbur hedges. His voice is soft and low, just like the clouds. "I don't care if you use the record player."

Tommy tenses. He foolishly thought that Wilbur wasn't going to bring it up. The time for it was last night, when Wilbur walked in on him lost in song. But Wilbur only gave him a truly exhausted look and then carried on.

"Ah," Tommy says. He turns his head to watch the traffic. "I was just—I was trying to acquaint myself with human music." His fingernails trace along the edge of his quarter. He doesn't calibrate his system, despite the way his hands itch to have it dance along his knuckles. "And... I thought it couldn't hurt to be familiar with your music tastes. Humans often bond over that, after all."

Wilbur turns his head to stare at him. Tommy reluctantly turns to meet his gaze. The expression he finds is inexplicably soft. "No matter the reason, you're welcome to use it whenever." The car starts moving again, and Wilbur returns his gaze to the road. There's a wistful gleam in his eyes. "It was nice. To see it again, after all this time." And then, in a whisper he probably wasn't meant to hear, he says, "And I've missed having a home full of music."

Tommy stares. He doesn't know what compels him—probably the unnamed sensation welling in his chest—but, when he opens his mouth to respond, the words just tumble out. "Can I ask you a question?"

Wilbur's lips quirk up into a smirk. "You just did."

His face goes slack in a sort of deadpan, and it feels very unimpressed. Wilbur's eyes flicker to the corner to catch sight of him. When he does, a grin splits his face. He laughs, something high and choppy.

Tommy can't help but stare in wonder, lips parted ever so slightly. He's never heard Wilbur laugh before. Not like this, at least. He's never been the reason.

When he finally settles down, a wry smile still tilting his lips, he nods. "You may ask another."

Tommy frowns. "Thank you, o' benevolent one," he snarks, pushing every ounce of Quackity into the statement. Wilbur huffs yet another soft laugh.

"Hey, watch it. I might not let you ask it."

Here, Tommy hesitates. He doesn't want to ruin the comfortable atmosphere that has settled over them. But Wilbur gives him another, more gentle, nod, so he continues. "I've noticed...you don't seem to eat a lot," he begins carefully, eyes locked on the coin clutched between his fingers.

"That's not a question." His voice is strangely blank with no hint of the playfulness from before.

Tommy's gut clenches. He fidgets, mouth pressed together into a thin line.

"Ask it," Wilbur demands. "Ask your question."

"Is there a reason... why you don't eat so often?"

His fingers are tight around the steering wheel, and, while his face is closed off and his jaw is tight, he doesn't seem angry. Or, at the very least, he doesn't seem prone to taking out his anger on Tommy. "I do eat," he answers tightly. "Just not a lot. I'm not a very hungry person."

Tommy can't help but feel that isn't the truth. But Wilbur isn't in a forgiving mood anymore, so he turns back to the road with a furrowed brow and lets the silence overtake them once again.

Chapter End Notes

Don't drink and drive, kids.

I honestly was really hoping to get a lot written during break, but I, once again, unanticipated just how busy and how distracted by family I would be. Surprisingly, now that classes have started back up, I will be back to my usual twice a week upload schedule. However, I will (most likely) be uploading Thursdays and Sundays.

Thank you all for reading and all your wonderful comments!

I also just finished up the outline for this fic and let me tell you, it is a long one! It's set to have around sixty chapters, so we'll be here for a while. And again, we have another suspiciously long chapter (9.8 K again). I hope you all enjoy!

a brother's concern and the tragedy of the sister wives

Chapter Summary

A meeting occurs between father and son; Elsewhere, yet another investigation, one more confusing than the last, occurs.

Chapter Notes

The trigger warnings for this chapter contain some pretty heavy spoilers, so I've included them in the end notes. Please check them out if you need to, though. There's some heavier stuff in this chapter. Stay safe, everyone :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Chapter Eleven: A Brother's Concern and The Tragedy of the Sister Wives

The door slams shut behind him with a resounding boom, but Phil barely even looks up from his desk.

Despite the hard set to his face, Techno doesn't mind. Instead, he contents himself to play this waiting game. Arms crossed snugly over his chest, he stands with one hip cocked and narrowed eyes burning a hole in Phil's pale scalp. If he stares hard enough, he's sure he can spot a few wiry grey hairs—a true and frightening testament of his age.

Sometimes, he feels paralyzed by the passage of time around them. Wilbur and he aren't gangly teenaged boys anymore, competing and protecting each other in the same breath. And Phil isn't as young as he used to be. It's a terrifying thought, and it's almost always accompanied by some devastating mental image of Phil swathed in a classy suit and laid to rest in a mahogany coffin.

It's a ridiculous image. Mostly because Phil would rather die than allow himself to be buried. Cremation was much more his style, especially if his ashes could be incorporated into something. A paperweight, or maybe a cool dagger.

With a long, tired exhale through his nose, Phil sets his pen down and cranes his head up. Even from across the room, Techno can hear his bones crackle. A clawed hand comes up to

rub at his neck. "Yes, Techno?"

His eyes are locked on Phil's expressive face, roaming his expression and lingering on the wrinkles he's accumulated. There's more than they last time they talked, which is as terrifying as it is concerning. He would hate to trouble him even further—*he was the golden son, the unburdened one, the one Phil never had to worry about, the one he never had to check in with*—but he's already here. He can't exactly turn back now, and Techno's presence in Phil's office is already enough of a rarity.

"I don't like this," he says, simple and sweet and with a completely straight face.

"You'll have to elaborate a little more, Techno."

The way Phil says his name makes him feel like a burden. It makes him hunch in on himself, shoulders caved protectively around his head. Despite it, he carries on. "That android." He wrinkles his nose, an automatic response to the thoughts his words inspire. "I don't trust it. Why'd you make Wil take it?"

It's a testament to how deep their bond goes—or rather, went—that he can still refer to his brother with a nickname. He doesn't think about that too hard, though, less the careful façade he's built shatter into jagged fragments.

"You sound just like him," Phil comments with a wry twist to his lips. If he squints, he can almost pretend it's a smile. His hands settle on top of the desk, and he delicately laces his fingers together. "I've already had to explain my decision too many times."

"Then explain it again." At the exasperated breath that leaves his nose, Techno frowns. "If you have to defend your decision so much, I'm not sure it's a very good decision."

Phil's eyes—a shocking, icy blue—pierce him with their careful assessment. There's a hardness to his face, and his expression is unusually closed off. "We needed that partnership with Cyberlife. Deviancy is only becoming more of a problem, and nobody here is qualified enough, in regard to androids, to be able to handle it." He takes a deep breath. "And Wil was the only one without a partner. Would you rather have me let Tommy run around unsupervised?"

"I know that," he says through gritted teeth. "But why did you make it *stay* with him?"

There's a hard set to his jaw, and Phil merely stares at him. "I don't know what you want me to say," he admits. "Honestly, I don't know what you're looking to get out of this conversation. To what—pick a fight with me?" Exhaustion permeates his entire being, hunching his shoulders in a way that ages him far past his years.

Techno, distantly, feels guilty, but he puts that unpleasant emotion on the back burner.

Phil sighs. "I thought it would be good for Wilbur to have someone else in the house. Even if it's just an android." He swallows past some lump in his throat, and his eyes dart away, refusing to meet Techno's. "I don't like the thought of him alone. I'm afraid of what he might do."

Techno's jaw clenches so hard it pops. Phil isn't alone in his feelings, although he would never admit any sort of fear aloud. "That thing—" he spits, mouth screwed up into a bitter scowl. "—isn't going to be able to help him. If anything, it's just going to make things worse. You *know* the sort of memories androids bring up."

Phil's face is deadly serious. "I know, Techno."

"Then why would you—" He inhales sharply and barely resists the urge to dig his palms into his eye sockets. His limbs itch with excess energy, though, and so he buries his insistent fingers in his hair. They comb through, pulling a little too harshly at some points, until the pain slowly ebbs away at his budding anger. "I don't want him to be alone, either," he admits, lowly, after he has calmed down a little. "*Of course* I don't. The mental state he's in—"

Techno cuts himself off before he can finish the sentence. His voice feels too laden with emotion to continue. He tries not to think of Wilbur too often, these days. Instead, he turns on his heel. He doesn't remember when he started pacing. "But an android. *Really?*"

Phil's expression hardens. "Look, you can question my choices all you want." Techno opens his mouth, but his father holds up a calloused hand. "*But*, at the end of the day, it was my decision *as captain*. And it doesn't seem like it's had any adverse effects yet."

He raises an expectant brow. "How do you know? Have you checked in at all?"

The silence is very telling. So is the guilty look on Phil's face.

Techno sets his jaw. "I don't trust that thing. It's—" He hesitates, eyes frantically searching the carpeted floor for the right words. He's distracted with thoughts of Tommy, of the expressions he made with Techno watched behind a tinted window. All he can see is the remorse twisting its expressions, its carefully widened, glistening eyes. He thinks of honeyed words dripping from venomous lips.

Everything about the machine had felt fake. It was clever, that much was abundantly clear in the careful way it assessed a situation, eyes scanning its environment thoroughly before settling on some kind of decision.

But Techno knew it to be dangerous. Not because of this new problem—deviancy, they were calling it, and what a load of bullshit that was—but because of its deception. Because of its persuasion.

Because of Wilbur's weakness.

"It's too convincing," he settles on, finally.

With a furrowing brow, Phil sits forward in his ridiculously ornate chair, elbows pressing firm against the desk. "Too convincing?"

Techno runs a frustrated hand through his hair again. It gets caught, as it so often does, in his ponytail. "It lies too well. More than that, it's... believable." He gives his hand a good yank and barely represses the sigh as loose strands of hair tickle his forehead. "It's very good at

playing a role, and I'm not sure how well Wilbur will be able to resist, if it chooses its face well."

Phil considers this for a long time. His hands slide apart and begin sorting through the mess of scattered papers on his desk. When the mess has been conquered—or at least, arranged into a sort of organized chaos—his face is significantly softer. Techno's heart stutters. "Then go check on him," he urges softly.

Techno wishes it could be easy. He aches with the thought of reaching out, his support a make-shift balm over the past few years.

But there's too much between them, now. And Wilbur still refuses to help himself. His resolve hardens.

If nothing else, he refuses to go back on his word. Techno Blade Craft is nothing without his pride.

"I can't," he admits, although it pains him to do so, and he swallows around the thickness in his throat. There's an uncomfortable pressure behind his eyes, but if he stares hard enough at the wall behind Phil's head, he can ignore it. Unfortunately, his gaze lands on an old picture of him and Wilbur at the zoo. He looks away sharply and tries to ignore the punch to his gut. "Do you think... you could check in on them?"

Phil gives him an indiscernible look that dances between pity and reluctance.

"For me, if not for him," he adds. Because it was hard to do things for Wilbur, nowadays. Nobody said it, but that's because nobody *needed* to say it. The heavy bags beneath Phil's eyes were a dead giveaway.

"Okay, Techno," he agrees with sad eyes. "I'll go check in soon."

September 27th, 2038

1:25 PM

"Who are we meeting again?" A bleary-eyed, squinting Wilbur grumbles from behind his slightly crumpled coffee cup. The aggressive sway of the old car makes the coffee inside splash dangerously near to the rim, but Wilbur pays it no mind. Instead, all his attention is directed to guiding them through traffic with one hand, taking small sips from a Styrofoam cup, and glaring at the faint impression of the sun hidden behind a thick blanket of clouds like it had personally offended him.

A car in the lane next to them honks angrily as Wilbur barely swerves to avoid it with muttered curses. Distantly, Tommy thinks he should be more concerned with his driving, but

he can't find it within him other than a white-knuckled grip on the handle above him. Besides, he's preoccupied with other thoughts.

Like the fact that Wilbur's defensiveness from a couple days ago is gone, slowly ebbing away with time until he rested in some nameless emotion.

There's a subtle change to him. It's quiet and unseen, but Tommy identifies it, sometimes. It's in the relaxed slope to his shoulders, and the slight smile when he wanders into a music-filled living room, despite whatever headache must be pressing behind his eyes.

It's a nice change. Tommy certainly isn't going to complain about it, especially since Wilbur's been more agreeable than ever—which isn't to say he's, at all, agreeable, but there *is* a significant improvement. At the very least, he actually considers Tommy's suggestions before inevitably turning them down.

And hey! That's progress!

At Wilbur's pointed, side-eyed look, Tommy forces himself to focus. He blinks a couple times as his thoughts slowly click back into place. "Do you remember one of the cases that we almost worked on? When we first met?" Wilbur hums uncertainly, which doesn't surprise him. "It was about a guy whose android partner attacked him and fled?"

Wilbur snaps his fingers. "That sounds familiar."

"We're meeting with that guy."

Wilbur furrows his brow and slides his drink into the change-filled cup holder. There's some leftover foam gathering on his upper lip. Tommy doesn't say anything, although the corner of his mouth does twitch. "Why are we meeting with him? It's been a month since he filed his report."

Tommy understands the confusion. "No, this is an entirely new case. He bought a second partner, who attacked him and fled, as well."

"Both of his android partners... attacked him and fled?" Wilbur raises a brow and glances over briefly to Tommy. At Tommy's confirming nod, he lets out a low whistle. "That's fucking suspicious. What is happening in that house that is making them deviate so fast? Or rather, what is he doing?"

Tommy watches as Wilbur bites into his lip. He's already slipping into his role as an investigator, which Tommy appreciates. "It is odd," he agrees hesitantly as Wilbur veers sharply to the right. "But let's try not to draw up any judgements just yet. There could be many reasons for their deviation." While Tommy had initially assumed the man had done something to inspire them to deviate—like in Niki's case—Dream often lectures him on the importance of taking in all the information before formulating an opinion.

And Tommy is far from knowing everything about this case.

"If you recall, we don't exactly know very much about deviancy," he adds.

Wilbur scowls. "If *you* recall, we're detectives. It's our job to make judgements."

Tommy freezes, artificial breath caught in his lungs. If he heard that correctly—and he did, because his audio processors are in perfect working condition—Wilbur had just included him as a detective. It's something so small and insignificant, but something infinitely warm settles in his chest because of them. At the very least, it's a step towards further progress.

"And besides, the only case of deviancy we even have to go off of is Niki. Who deviated because of trauma and abuse."

The car jerks with another sharp turn as they pull onto a residential street. It sends Tommy sailing against the door with a meaty thud. "I'm just saying, let's not jump to any conclusions. That is a ridiculously small sample size, and we would be fools to take away anything yet."

The car stops surprisingly smoothly, with the tires on the passenger side nestled right against the curb. Wilbur shifts the car into park and then squints at Tommy. "God," he groans. "You're such a nerd."

"Says the theater kid," Tommy retorts with a frown. "Stop with this cliché pot kettle routine."

A strange huff leaves Wilbur's mouth, but Tommy is too busy peering through the window to pay it any attention.

The house is nothing particularly special. Pale blue paint covers a squat, two-story house with a tall, tiled roof. He takes in the windows, which are surrounded by worn shutters and little planters filled with just wilted flowers. The door is too-thin and abnormally tall, with a dark blue finish and a bronze knocker in the center. Nothing about its quaint appearance would suggest that anything less than domestic bliss was occurring inside.

As soon as Wilbur shuts the engine off with a final low rumble, the door swings open. In its place stands a stocky man. His hair is straw-colored and flat, and it lays weirdly across his too-wide forehead. His watery eyes stare at the car for a long time before he very slowly—and very awkwardly—waves. It's an odd sort of wave. Tommy imagines this is the kind of wave a person would give to the police officers that have just arrived.

Wilbur breathes out through his nose. He's weirdly close, spine curved as he leans forward and around Tommy to get a better look at both the man and his abode. "Oh boy," he mutters. It takes him a minute to compose himself, but, when he shoves open the car door and steps outside, it's like he's an entirely different person. His face is transformed with something undefinable but entirely pleasant, making his features softer and more approachable.

Tommy watches with wide-eyed fascination. He follows after him, hands awkwardly fumbling with the door handle as he refuses to pry his eyes away from this transformation.

In a way, they're very similar. Tommy is programmed to adapt his personality to any situation. It was a necessity built into him to further interrogations, investigations, and any other situations where he would need it. He supposes it makes sense that Wilbur would be trained to do something similar, but it still comes as a surprise. Tommy's never seen him be anything but unabashedly himself.

As they reach the shoddy stone porch—if it can even be called that, for it truly is just a concrete rectangle with one stair leading up to it—Tommy gets a better look at the man. Pale bruises litter his cheek and darken his eye, and his nose looks crooked and swollen. He smiles, nervously, and inadvertently reveals half of a missing tooth.

"Hello," Wilbur greets. While there isn't quite a smile on his face, there definitely is the impression of one. It lightens his face favorably. "I'm Lieutenant Wilbur Soot." He pauses, meaningfully, to allow space for Tommy to introduce himself, as he so often does.

But his eyes are locked onto that broken tooth. It's cracked and jagged, and it must cause him some kind of pain. Distantly, he wonders if it broke in the first attack or the second. He opens his mouth to introduce himself, but what comes out is this: "Was it your first or second partner who broke your tooth?"

The man gapes. "Excuse me?"

Next to him, Wilbur coughs and smothers a budding smile with his palm. His shoulders shake with barely suppressed laughter.

Tommy blinks. "Oh, sorry." If he's perfectly honest, he has no idea why that slipped past his lips. He doesn't remember choosing to say that and, based on the man's sour expression, it certainly didn't help earn his favor. But the crinkle around Wilbur's eyes feels like victory, somehow. "I'm Tommy, the android sent by Cyberlife. We're here to investigate your claims."

The man doesn't look pleased in the slightest. "...I didn't realize there would be an android here." His mouth is twisted into a harsh scowl, but there's something skittish about him. His eyes are wide and locked onto Wilbur, and his hands are suddenly unable to sit still in his pockets. At Wilbur's downright unimpressed look—after he had slowly managed to school his face—the man laughs deprecatingly. "Sorry, I just don't have good experiences with them." He rubs the back of his neck. "As you can probably see."

In return for all his efforts, Wilbur can only offer a tight-lipped smile. "Well, that's what we're here to talk about." He places a foot on the step, but the man doesn't move out of his way. His broad shoulders take up the entire doorway.

"Is there... any way he can not be involved?" His eyes slide past the two of them until he settles on something behind them. "Maybe he can wait in the car?" he suggests hopefully.

Wilbur doesn't waste any time. "No," he states bluntly. He then hoists himself up the rest of the way, hand clenched around a rusted, metal railing. "Are we going inside, then? Or will you have us stand outside on your porch the whole time?"

Dumbstruck, the man steps out of the doorway. An unattractive flush claims his ears.

Tommy follows after Wilbur, pressing his lips into a firm line. It's a desperate bid not to smile so openly, but it seems to work well enough. He brushes past the 'victim', not paying any care to contorting himself around his body. Their shoulders clash, and the man recoils. His eyes, when they eventually meet Tommy's, are mistrustful.

That's fine. Tommy is quickly becoming acquainted with the feeling, and he certainly isn't going to let it interfere with the investigation. If he has to tear this house down plank by plank to pry out its secrets, he will without hesitation.

The inside of the home doesn't reveal anything amiss. The door opens to a long, narrow hallway with a set of carpet stairs running parallel to them. At the bottom of the stairs, there's a small entryway that opens to an office. Wide windows interrupt the wall, letting in the pale light of a cloudy sky. In the center of the room sits a large desk with a wide computer monitor. The surface of the desk is obscured with scattered papers.

As they wander in—perfectly content to show themselves in, especially after his little *display*—Tommy takes in the pictures hanging on the wall.

Or, more accurately, he takes in the obvious *absence* of the pictures on the wall. He notes the perfectly spaced nails embedded in the wall with seemingly no purpose. There's also a slight discoloration to the wall—likely due to the small window in the door, and the angle of the sunlight filtering in. However, in the shapes of small rectangles, there are patches where the wall is less discolored.

Tommy tucks this information away into his processor. Then, he folds his hands behind his back.

The hallway opens up to a large kitchen and dining room combination. The man, who has been trailing behind them helpless, clears his throat awkwardly. "We can talk in the living room."

For a second, Tommy is certain that Wilbur is going to, spitefully, ignore that comment by plopping down on one of the tall stools that line the marble countertop. He can see the indecision in his steps, in the stilted way he shifts his weight from one foot to the other. In the end, he swivels on his heel and marches into the living room, and Tommy is helpless to do anything but follow.

The living room is what he would call 'artfully messy'. Colorful magazines cover a squat coffee table, and mismatched chairs fill the room. They settle in on a long couch with a holey afghan draped over the back of it, with just enough space between them to squeeze in another person.

The man slowly sits down into one of the chairs—one with a bright blue, floral pattern—and gives them, or rather *Wilbur*, a tight-lipped smile.

"Your name?" Wilbur prompts, hips shifting to the side as he digs around in his back pocket. He fiddles around with something until he procures a small, beat up notebook. With a confused frown, Tommy watches as he flips past pages of scrawled writing until he finds a fresh page about halfway through.

Something about this—Wilbur and Tommy gathered close together on one side with an opponent on the other—feels undefinably *right*. Like some sort of puzzle piece slotting into the perpetually empty space in his chest. It feels, with Wilbur's face carefully neutral and his sharp eyes occasionally taking in their surroundings, like it was always meant to be this way.

"I thought you would know that already," he says after too long.

Tommy does know it. It's there, filed away deep within his central processor, ever since this man had sent in his very first incident report.

But he doesn't respond. Not only has this man—James—shown a sort of dislike of him, but he has the feeling that anything he says will only harm their investigation. For now, at the very least, he's content to sit back and let Wilbur run the show.

Wilbur shrugs. The motion shakes the unstable couch. "Well, it's always good to go over these things," he says dismissively. The corners of his mouth are ticked upwards into something resembling a friendly expression, but there is no warmth in his eyes.

Tommy allows himself to watch James. He takes in the bob of his Adam's apple and the press of his lips into a thin line, just briefly. Tommy narrows his eyes, scanning the crease of his brow and the frequent flicker of his eyes. He can't hold eye contact for too long, it seems.

He's nervous, Tommy decides as he sits back in the seat, letting his back press into the cushion behind him. It's nothing like the couch back at the house, with its too-soft cushions and its conforming nature, molding itself around the shape of his body. This one is newer, and it keeps him perfectly upright. He squirms a little. The contrast is distracting, and his mind is all too content to analyze the differences instead of paying attention.

He's nervous. If nothing else, Tommy staples that thought in the center of his mind. *Why?* His metaphorical fingers reach out desperately, grasping at the faint whispers of thoughts that gather at the edges of his processor. Well, there could be any number of reasons. Already, Tommy's system details a list, of sorts.

Police officers tend to make people nervous. Androids tend to inspire a number of different reactions in people, including anxiety. James himself already indicated that he doesn't like to be around androids, due to the past attacks.

But his shifty eyes, too frequent in their movement, betray a sense of... Tommy tilts his head as he considers. Deception, possibly? People often look away when they lie, but the man hasn't even begun to give any answers. What could he possibly be lying about?

A sense of utter wrongness and sickly unease settles on his chest. His hand automatically reaches for his chest, fingers subconsciously scratching at his suit like he'd actually be able to feel something pressing down on it.

Wilbur's early words are all too present in his mind. He has the unshakeable feeling that something truly terrible has happened in this house—the *Live, Laugh, Love* posters hung on the wall seem to be laughing at *him*—but with no evidence to back his suspicions.

James wets his lips. "My name is James Monroe."

Wilbur nods to himself. "And what do you do, James?"

It seems such a sudden and odd change, and Tommy lets himself ponder it as the flow of mundane information slips in one ear. Wilbur is the perfect picture of professionalism; his face, slack with seriousness and contemplation, is turned towards the witness. Every so often, he nods his head or gives a little acknowledging hum, just *something* to indicate his attention.

This sudden return—for Tommy can only assume that he once was capable of *something* resembling professionalism—is pleasing, but no less confusing. Wilbur seems to parse through the information being presented carefully, jotting down a few concise, but completely illegible notes.

And that's another thing. Tommy can't help but stare at it, eyes narrowed in consideration. He's never seen the notebook before. But it's age, and the appearance of its pages—edges worn down and soft, blank lines filled with writing—clearly denote its use. It looks right at home in Wilbur's hands, his pinky propping up one odd corner.

He reveals in it all the same, even though he has no idea what inspired this sudden change.

"As I'm sure you're well aware—" Wilbur is saying when Tommy finally forces himself to *focus*. "—we're here today because of your report. I'm led to believe it's your second one, is that right?"

"It is," he agrees easily.

Wilbur taps his fingers against the coffee table, back curved as he hunches over his notebook. The noise makes Tommy antsy, and he instinctually reaches inside his coat pocket until his fingers touch his coin. It's cool between his fingers. "Why don't you explain the situation? Or, rather, *situations*."

James only hesitates for a split second—thumb nail scraping along the skin surrounding his nail—before he launches into his explanation. Tommy runs his fingers along the quarter in his palm and listens. His mind is already whirring, and his re-constructive programming activates.

The words that slip from James' mouth, careless and frantic and surprisingly descriptive, fill the room. He's a good story teller, and Tommy sits completely still, eyes unordinarily focused on some unremarkable patch of drywall, as he imagines the scene.

Joy was a standard BL100 model, created for the specific purpose of providing romantic companionship. If he closes his eyes just right, he can picture her. A young looking android designed with the most flexible design. It was easily changed, which enabled Cyberlife to better cater to the needs and preferences of their customers. But when he thinks of her, he sees the default model. Dirty blonde hair spills over a slender shoulder, eyes light and bright and blue, and a soft, realistic smile.

Joy came into James' life about eight months ago, and, according to James, they had been living happily together since. She was the definition of perfection, which James raved about for several minutes, despite her betrayal overshadowing his fondness for her. He happily recounts the day he met her—and Tommy does find it interesting how carefully he uses his

words; met instead of bought, lived together instead of...well, he doesn't know what the alternative is—and Tommy lets the images filter in.

He can almost see the default Cyberlife store. Androids line the walls, safely tucked away into glass containers with pleasant smiles on their faces. Others stand on high pedestals, looking benevolently down at the customers milling about the shop. James had, apparently, spent many hours in the store, cultivating her personality until she was exactly right. At the purchase of a companion android, customers were tasked with a long and detailed survey to perfectly tailor the android's personality.

James speaks of the following months of domestic bliss. Of how Joy had settled in, taking to the house like a fish to water. The decorations they see—and at this point, he points to all the homey little touches around the room—were all Joy, who had taken to reading home decorating magazines in her free time. The smile on his face is soft, but the longer he talks, the more bittersweet he grows.

Eventually, he pauses, mouth pressed into a firm line. At this point, he tells them about the attack—or the betrayal, as he calls it.

Tommy immerses himself in the story. It's a fine, sunny day, and the air is still filled with the dying heat of summer. Joy and James have spent the entire day outside in their backyard. Joy, sprawled out on a near-by lawn chair, regales James with stories of all the wonderful parties she plans to have when their deck is finally complete. James, crouched in the dying grass with a hammer in hand, is the one who actually has to build said deck.

But Tommy can picture his fond face as Joy rambles, hands gesturing wildly as strands of hair blow across her freckled face. All is well.

James sits back onto his heels with a hot puff of air. Sweat slides down his face, caressing his cheeks and dripping off his chin to water the plants below. It's too damn hot, and he tells Joy, with yet another fond smile, that he'll be right back. A cool glass of lemonade must sound heavenly, and, as James goes on to describe, Joy had made a pitcher earlier in the day.

But when he comes out not five minutes later, thirst pleasantly quenched and sweat wiped from his skin, he finds the lawn chair empty, and Joy nowhere to be found. After a quick search of the house, he finds her in the garage, car door opened wide and angry curses as she fiddles with something in the driver's seat. At his entrance, she looks up; her face, as Tommy imagines it, is twisted with desperation.

Upon his approach, Joy lashes out. Her fists are quick and efficient, and while he's sprawled on the ground from the force of her punches, she flees.

Tommy presses his lips together to keep any words from spilling out. He can't help but feel like James is leaving *something* out. While deviants *are* irrational creatures, he has yet to meet one that didn't have some logical progression. It seems odd that Joy would suddenly snap, going from lounging trophy wife to feral predator in the span of maybe five minutes. There had to have been some kind of trigger, he decides with a grim look.

But questions from his lips will only serve to deter James. Thankfully, a quick glance at Wilbur—whose face is scrunched up and terribly open in his thoughtfulness—reveals that they are having similar thoughts. At the very least, he can count on Wilbur to ask the questions he can't.

And then comes Stella. He met her after the worst week of his life. After drowning in his grief, he found himself wandering the very same shop where he met Joy. She's not much different from Joy, although she is a BL200 model. The hope, at least according to James, was that a newer model would be much less likely to malfunction.

Despite this, some residual fear had remained, and James, despite the drain on his wallet, had Stella checked out regularly. For two weeks, they slowly settled into a new kind of domestic bliss.

Until, of course, a very similar phenomenon occurred, and James was left bruised, broken, and depressed.

Wilbur takes this in silently, bottom lip pulled between his teeth. His hand moves fast, and his chicken scratch fills the pages with relevant notes. Tommy observes over his shoulder, although he doesn't put any effort into deciphering this unknown language. "Did either of your—" he hesitates for a moment, eyes narrowing ever so slightly as he searches the carpet for the appropriate word. He eventually settles on one. "—partners... show any indicators before the attacks? Any odd behavior that deviated from the norm?"

It doesn't take James long to think, although he does tilt his head in careful consideration. "No," he decides. "There was nothing that would've suggested that they would've lashed out like that."

Tommy runs his thumb along the ridged edge of his quarter. He lets it slip through the cracks in between his fingers. It's a solid, cool weight in his palm. "Were there any differences between the androids? Personality or preference wise?"

Companion androids were special because they were the only androids to have 'personalities'. This, of course, was nothing even close to a human personality, but it was a set of complex behaviors and traits coded into an android to create a more life-like partner.

Tommy toys around with his thoughts, considering each one carefully. It is possible that complexity in code created more chances for malfunction. It would certainly explain why Stella, who had only existed for roughly two weeks, deviated much faster than Joy.

When the silence goes on for much too long, he risks a glance up at James. There, he finds only barefaced suspicion. The only indication that he even heard Tommy is the frequent flicker of his eyes, which accidentally meet Tommy's more than a few times. Still, he doesn't reply, and the silence grows between them.

Beside him, Wilbur frowns. "Well, were there?" he prompts flatly. There's just enough steel in his tone, and James smiles apologetically. It doesn't meet his eyes.

"No. Not that I can think of," James answers. "They were very similar." *That's a nice way to put it*, Tommy can't help but think. Everything about this man seems to be some kind of farce. His smiles never crinkle his eyes, his simpering tone never pleases anyone but him, and he hides the reality of an android partner behind honeyed words. Despite his careful decisions, the precise manner in which he picks his words, it doesn't change the reality of the situation.

Then, with the sort of triumphant look of spoiled child, he pipes up, "Actually, the only difference between them was their model. Stella was more advanced than Joy." Then, he gives Wilbur a meaningful look that—by the blankness of his face—the detective doesn't get. "I thought that would help with the whole... assault thing."

That doesn't seem to matter, he notes with an almost inaudible hum. *At least, not yet*. They don't have enough information yet to make any definitive conclusions. Wilbur makes almost the exact same noise in acknowledgement, although his is much louder, meant to reach other ears.

Tommy stills. The coin—that had previously been happily dancing along the backs of his knuckles—gets trapped in his clenched fist. The action, he now realizes, which had come so naturally to him, is a habit of Wilbur's. The thought makes him freeze, and his body tenses with the realization.

With a sly glance to Wilbur from the corner of his eye, he confirms that this realization had not dawned on him. He's lost in his own thoughts, and the end of his pen taps restlessly against the paper.

Tommy feels foolish. Why would it when Wilbur is blind not only to his own actions, but to others', as well?

"Did either of them receive any damage before they attacked?"

Tommy nods to himself in appreciation. It's a good question, and he'd be glad of the answer. Damage, and improper repair, could potentially result in some malfunction. And what is deviancy if not one giant malfunction?

"No." James shakes his head. Then, he frowns. "Well, Joy did receive some—" he hesitates here, lips pressed together into a thin line. "—internal damage, although I have no idea how it happened. I was always very gentle with her."

The implications of his words are not lost on him, and Tommy only barely manages to keep the deep frown off his face. His narrowed eyes scan his expression—the tilt of his brows and his eyes, wide and guileless. After a moment, he decides that James is telling the truth. His eyes always betray his nervousness—and therefore, his deception—and right now, they reveal nothing but concerned surprise.

Despite the questions rapidly swirling in his mind, it doesn't seem like any of them will be answered. He has the strong—and likely right, if the still sour twist to James' mouth is any indicator—feeling that any attempts to open his mouth will be nipped at the bud.

And so, with a plan forming in his mind, he lets words sprawl across his vision as he drafts up a text. With a blink, he sends the rest of his questions to Wilbur.

Wilbur's hand automatically reaches for his phone after it's short, succinct buzz. His brows furrow as his eyes scan over the message. Then, they raise to meet Tommy's.

Tommy raises his brows at him in a meaningful way. Then, for whatever reason—and Tommy will always, perpetually blame Quackity's remaining influence over him—his face twitches and his eye closes briefly. A wink, it's called. It feels awkward on his face.

"If you don't mind," he starts, a little unsure as to who, exactly, he's addressing. He looks between Wilbur and James frequently. "I'm going to do a cursory look around. It's much easier for my sensors to pick up on evidence that human eyes have missed." Without waiting for a reply—from either of them—Tommy grins and chirps, "Thanks, bye.:

"What? But—"

:"Don't mind him," Wilbur dismisses easily with a lazy wave of his hand. Tommy, lips pressed together to once again suppress his smile, can't help but feel pleased at how quickly Wilbur covers for him. "Tell me about your family. I can't imagine many people are too accepting of an android partner."

Tommy is already slipping past James and back into the small kitchen. The sounds of conversation fade into the background. He takes in the kitchen.

It's, well, it's your average kitchen. There's a stove shoved against the wall, a microwave attached a few feet above it, and a marble-topped island that wraps around the wall. A sink just below a wide window—which allows him a brief glimpse into the backyard, where the skeleton of the unfinished deck lays undisturbed. Against the opposite wall, a spotless, stainless steel fridge gleams at him.

Finding nothing, he begins to turn on his heel to explore another part of the house. Something catches his eye, though, and so he aborts the motion half-way through. He ends up smacking his hip against the counter-top, and he swears quietly, despite the fact that it doesn't—*can't*—hurt.

Stark against the pale wooden floors and half-hidden behind the stove, there lies a single drop of thirium. It's unremarkable, and Tommy can't even confirm if Stella was injured when she fled, but he gravitates towards it anyway. He crouches, fingers tracing the mark. It's smooth, unblemished, and he sucks in a careful breath. Then, he raises his head and looks for more.

They aren't hard to find. Stella, or whoever had left these, clearly hadn't noticed they were bleeding. It must've been a small wound—small enough that it didn't cause enough system issues, but large enough that it wasn't healed right away. The drops are spaced far apart, but Tommy tracks them down like a bloodhound.

He winds past the expansive laundry room, barely giving its hanging clothes a glance, and past the carefully tucked away bathroom. And then, just when the thirium trail seems to stop for good, Tommy stumbles across a door.

The door is metal and painted with a muted yellow and respectively cheerful for the clues it might be hiding. Tommy throws a glance over his shoulder, to the empty rooms behind him. If he focuses hard enough, he can just make out the low murmur of conversation.

With a deep breath, he twists the doorknob and gently nudges the door open.

The interior of the garage is cool and damp, despite the dry heat outside. It's dark, and, with the concrete floors, it feels vaguely cave-like. The only light, save for the slowly widening stripe from the inside of the house, slips in from the cracks around the garage door. With one last shove, the door swings open all the way, and the artificial light illuminates the blank face of an android.

The synthetic breath is a tight pressure caught in his throat.

Stella makes a pathetic form. Her stick-thin arms wrap tightly around her legs, trapping them against her chest in a protective huddle. Her chin is propped against her bony knees, and a curtain of brown hair threatens to hide her expression. It allows the light in, though, and Tommy can see the dissociation that glazes her features. Shudders wrack her body every so often, and her shoulders shake, but no tears slip down her cheeks, still burdened with baby fat.

Tommy doesn't move, other than to let the door swing shut behind him. It's a testament to her mental state—or the severity of malfunction—that she doesn't even look up at the noise.

BL200 models aren't supposed to look like *that*. It's the only thought he can think, the only idea he can possibly latch onto as he stares down at the curled up form of something that doesn't look older than a teenager. "Stella?" he calls out. His voice is scarce more than a whisper.

She looks up sharply. Her eyes, green and glassy, latch onto him, although she never come into focus. Her lips move silently and wordlessly. The lack of an LED at her temple is a little startling—despite his knowledge that many companion androids lack them— and it leaves her face obscured in the renewed darkness.

The only sound in the garage is her panting.

Her first attack catches him by surprise. He, wrongfully, assumed that she wouldn't be much different from Niki—a docile thing resigned to the grim reality of the situation and willing to go peacefully. But as her jagged fingernails gouge into the skin of his forearms, thirium beading on his skin in their wake, he acknowledges, with the distance of a person instinctively responding to an unpredictable attack, how wrong he is.

She is a concerned animal, desperate and unyielding, and he is the zookeeper foolish enough to forget about her untrimmed claws.

Tommy pulls back just in time. His arms knock against his chest, and his legs buckle, dropping his heavy weight to the ground. It doesn't stop the blooming scratches that mar his skin nor the steady leak of thirium that drips from his elbows, but it does prevent her from latching onto him.

His back smacks against the concrete stairs, and he grimaces with the bloom of pressure.

Tommy refuses to let her become accustomed to this new change, and he pushes his palms against the rough step. Using the momentum, he slides underneath her spread legs.

His choices here are minimal. Tommy needs her intact, refuses to leave without her or to damage her in any way, and he also needs time to question her alone. His biggest mistake with Niki was calling for Wilbur too soon. He squandered valuable trust in that moment; trust he could've used to gain more information.

Stella doesn't let him carefully mull over his options. She lunges at him, mouth pulled back into a soundless snarl. He merely steps to the side, and, like a charging bull that can't reroute, she goes sailing past him.

"Stella, I'm not here to hurt you," he tries as her flat palms smack into the wall.

The situation isn't dire, at least not yet. His hands are sticky with pooling thirium, but he still remembers to keep his voice down. It wouldn't do either of them good if James were to walk in on their little dance. Something heavy and uncomfortable settles in his chest at that thought.

Stella whirls around in a flurry of tangled, frizzy hair. Despite the momentum carrying her too far, she recovers quickly. With an untrained but deadly precise elbow, she strikes out. Tommy diverts it with a careful push of his hand.

She snarls, this time. It's a deep, angry sound, and she accompanies it with a wayward swipe. It catches him in the cheek, nails raking along his jaw until warnings blink in his vision. Then, while she still has the upper hand, she sweeps out with her leg.

With a locked jaw, he side steps the move and pushes her out of range with a blue palm. It leaves a smeared handprint on the front of her green dress. "I don't want to fight you," he breathes out through clenched teeth. It sounds like every cliché movie line ever, but his system is going haywire. All the power is being simultaneously pushed into healing the slowly shrinking scratches and into his predictive software.

With a gnarled, clawed hand, she swipes out at him again. This time, he learns from his mistakes and knocks her hand away. Unfortunately, she is learning, as well. The swipe was just a distraction and with his eyes tracking her hand, she throws her entire weight at him. The movement catches him off-guard and sends both of them tumbling to the ground.

His back connects with ground, and the sensation travels quickly through his wires. Stella rights herself quickly, tossing one leg over the top of his abdomen to hold him down. Then, her hands wrap around his throat.

At first, it's okay. It's not good, obviously, a rogue deviant has the advantage, body leveraged over him and hands lightly wrapped around his throat. It's not good, *of course*, but Tommy still has his wits about him, and that's the most important thing. He opens his mouth—likely to spew yet another sickeningly cliché line—because he's already decided to play this dangerous game, to give in to her unstoppable force in hopes that she'll see he's not a threat.

So, he goes limp in her grasp like a puppet with its strings cut. His hands flop down near his head, hands splayed out with the palms facing up. It's the universal sign of surrender, and Tommy can only hope that she takes it.

But then, her hands squeeze around his throat.

And Tommy's mind shuts off.

It's like a very dangerous switch has been flipped, shutting down his rational brain and instead booting up some sort of animal instinct. Ice fills his veins, coats his throat, freezes his limbs. His vision blurs, and all he can imagine is the throbbing sensation in the back of his head, curls damp with thirium, and a different, wider set of hands tightening around his throat.

Electricity hits his wires, and he jolts. Filled with the sudden desperation to *get her off, get her away, get air*, Tommy bucks his hips. Like a particularly violent bull, he thrashes wild, hands clawing at hers. He can feel the skin of his neck retracting under her fingers; he can feel how she presses down harder on his neck in response.

Wide, bulging eyes land on her face. Her stare is vacant and glazed and grimly, viciously determined.

It's only a matter of time until one of them gives in—her fingers or his neck—and he has the sinking feeling that it's not going to be her.

A choked gasp leaves his lips, his last bit of—unnecessary—air. There's a burning sensation in his throat, thirium under his fingernails. Over his pained choking sounds, he can hear the dangerous creak of his neck. The plastic groans under her hands.

Something hot and wet slides down his cheek.

Software Instability: ^

And then, something happens. Her eyes, which had been locked on her own stained hands as they tightened around his non-existent windpipe, suddenly widen. All the anger leaves her face in a single second, and some unidentifiable emotion—because how could he possibly *think* with the pressure around his neck—fills up the gaps it left. Her hands loosen.

Stella stumbles back, hands colliding with the rough concrete, and she drags herself away until her back hits the concrete wall.

Eternally grateful for this change of heart, Tommy gasps. Sweet, sweet air rushes in, unobstructed, and he drinks it in with the greed of a drowning man. He doesn't need air to function, doesn't even need it a little bit, but he chokes with gratitude on each shivering breath.

As soon as he's certain he's not going to *die*—androids don't die, his system reminds him clinically—he scuttles backwards to put some much needed space between the two of them.

His trembling hands clutch at his neck, fingers rubbing frantically at the returning skin in reassurance.

They eye each other; Tommy stares with the wary suspicion of someone who has just been strangled, and Stella with an absolutely gutted expression.

"I'm not going to tell him you're here," he says.

And really, that's the heart of the issue. Stella never cared about him, just what he might do and who he might summon. She watches him now, eyes lingering on his throat before flickering to the angry and still unhealed gashes on his face and arms.

"I don't think I could blame you if you did, after that," she says quietly.

Tommy wipes at his cheeks. When he pulls his hand back to check whatever slipped down his cheek, he finds a transparent wetness not unlike tears. Unable to deal with that information, he tucks it away to examine at a later—*read never*—date.

And then he pulls himself together again, slotting the fragmented pieces back together and letting the instability slip away. When he meets her gaze next, it's with the clinical gaze of a detective. "Maybe not, but it doesn't change the fact that I'm not going to. Now, my partner and I are here because that man—" The absence of his name is intentional, of course, and that little trick was learned after watching Niki flinch too many times at the mention of her abuser. "—filed two reports of his companions attacking and fleeing."

Her lips twist into a bitter scowl.

"We, of course, believe there is more to the story," he reveals quickly and quietly, gaze darting to the door. Tommy doesn't know how long they have, but he needs to make the most of it. "Androids don't deviate for no reason, after all."

"So it's normal?" Stella breathes out with the painfully hopeful look of someone wrestling with confusing feelings. She stares at him like he might contain all the answers, and, in that moment, he wishes he does.

But, like always, he hesitates. And then he chooses his words very carefully. "It's becoming increasingly normal."

Stella sighs, eyes fluttering closed with an insurmountable relief. "It's normal," she repeats. He lets her have this brief moment, this small, tiny oasis in a sea of pain, and she eventually pulls herself back together again. When she opens her eyes, there's something steely in them. "You're a detective?" He nods. "What do you need to know?"

Tommy smiles. It doesn't feel like a nice smile. "Everything."

And so she tells him everything. Words slip from trembling lips, and the picture she paints isn't a pretty one.

As a newly built android, Stella had the massive misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Heartbroken after Joy's betrayal, James had stumbled into the Cyberlife store at a

startling nine in the morning, reeking of alcohol and desperation, and immediately latched onto her with greedy, grubby hands.

After being cajoled away from her by a nervous employee, he had decreed, with all the posture and audacity of a king, that he wanted an android—*that* android, Stella clarified with a sour expression—exactly like Joy. The employee had looked up their records, and then Stella had been whisked away to the back.

When she gained awareness next, things were different. She was shorter, for one, with the skinnier, frailer body of a growing adolescent. Her face was rounder, eyes wide and innocent. There was also this demanding code pressing in on her, dictating her every move. This 'personality', as the salesman had called it, fit her like an ill-suited skin.

But James was beaming, and all the hard edges from before were softened under his affectionate glow.

And so, their love story began.

The first time he had accidentally called her Joy, she hadn't stopped thinking about it all day. It stuck in her mind like an insidious thought, slowly poisoning her mind until it consumed her. She had seen the pictures, after all. The same pictures that Tommy can see, gently shoved behind the metal shelves, of James and a Stella look alike.

"I wanted to break the pictures," she confesses, mouth screwed up into a scowl as they both stare at the pictures. Despite their rough parting, it seemed James still held a world of affection—or however much a man could care for an inanimate object, a toy suited to his liking—for Joy. Despite it, he couldn't bring himself to throw out all the pictures. "Not because I was jealous of her, or anything. But it suddenly made sense why I felt bad all the time. I was programmed to be someone else."

The resentment cultivated with continuous slip-ups. Despite her programming, Stella proved that she was not Joy, and that only seemed to make James frustrated. The tension only grew worse, with James either ignoring the differences or actively trying to mold Stella into what he wanted.

And then, at the height of their disconnection, she found Joy's note. Soon after that, she deviated and ran away after defending herself against untoward and unwanted advances.

Despite gentle prodding, she refuses to reveal what was in the note. "That's for me and Joy to know," she insists when Tommy pokes a little harder. "I'm sorry, but I won't share."

Tommy recognizes a lost cause when he sees one, and so he acquiesces with a dip of his head. "That's fine. Why don't you tell me about Joy, then?"

"I don't know very much about her," she answers with a dip of her head. "James didn't speak very much about her, despite how often he mixed us up. But what I knew about her confused me. I never knew how an android could break beyond their programming like that." Her eyes meet his, and a bitter smile graces her face. "I didn't understand it before, but I do now." Her

hands clutching at her arms like her iron-clad grip is the only thing keeping her tethered. "He ruins everything he touches."

They fall into an uneasy silence. It's not quite uncomfortable, but it seems neither really knows what to say.

Then, she hesitantly extends her arm. The gap between them is comically wide, and her arm only covers a short distance. "I can show you, if you want." The skin disappears from her arm with a shimmering wave.

Tommy reaches out, crawling awkwardly until their palms fit together like puzzle pieces. Her hand is smooth beneath his, and he only hesitates for a second before his own skin retracts.

Immediately, information burst to life beneath his close eyelids. It's like a live wire accidentally touched one of his, and electricity races up his arm from the connection point. Tommy can see her memories; trapped behind a glass display, subject to the leering, jealous eyes of poorer men, and James' drunken face popping into view.

There are other memories, too. James and his smile that never quite meets his eyes. James and his demanding, vicious hands. James and his overwhelming, never ending presence pervading the house like some kind of noxious gas.

The images finally end, and Tommy cautiously opens his eyes. He leaves Stella's hand in his—a comforting, solid weight—and she doesn't pull back. They remain connected, and a steady stream of code exchanges freely between their systems. He parses through it quickly. It's impossible to decide where to begin.

Behind them, the door cracks open. "Oh, there you are, Tommy," Wilbur says. His face is relaxed, and the pen from before is tucked behind his ear. Then, his eyes slide further and land on Stella's tensed form. Tommy's hand gripping hers is the only thing keeping her from launching, and he's grateful for that. Wilbur wouldn't be able to hold up under her attacks for nearly as long as Tommy did.

Putting a shaking finger up to his lips, he frantically waves Wilbur away. If Wilbur is here, casting an intimidating silhouette over the gathered androids, then that means there is nothing distracting James. "Don't tell James."

It doesn't take long for Wilbur's expression to thaw with understanding. He gives a tight, brief nod and turns to close the door. A sharp intake of breath is all the warning they get, before James is shouldering his way past Wilbur.

"Stella?" His face is twisted with careful relief, like he doesn't dare let himself hope that his second partner has returned to him after all. Tommy can do nothing, mind whirring with frantic possibilities, other than position himself firmly in front of her. "I'm glad you're here," he says, despite the harsh way the shadows highlight the bruises across his face. "I know you're probably scared, but come back inside. We can work it out together."

Stella looks like she would do literally anything else. Her hand is a vise around Tommy's.

"James—" Tommy begins, but he doesn't even get the chance to talk him down. A second seems to be the span of his patience, and, with heavy steps, he marches across the garage. Stella scrambles back until she's pressed against the wall, and Tommy goes with her. Their hands stay locked together.

James approaches with sure, certain steps. His hand reaches out and wraps in a grip so tight that the skin automatically retracts from Stella's wrist. "You're my partner," he spits out through grit teeth. He yanks on her arm. "You're supposed to obey me."

Stella cries out. Her body moves with James' powerful tugs, but both her and Tommy's combined force keeps her rooted in place.

"Enough of this rebellion. You're coming with me!"

This is enough to trigger some kind of reaction. Stella's face, which had previously been painted with horror, twists into a grim determination. It's the same kind of expression she wore when she pinned Tommy down, hands wrapped around his throat. It's the expression of someone who knows what they have to do, but isn't particularly looking forward to it.

With a yell, James releases her suddenly. It sends Stella sailing into Tommy, sprawled across his body with too-bony elbows digging into his abdomen. "You bitch!" he hisses, hand gingerly wrapped around his wrist. Tommy can just make out a set of deep, gouging nail marks in his skin. They bleed steadily.

James reaches for her again, but Stella is ready this time. She writhes in Tommy's hold, chin digging into his shoulder as she reaches behind him for some unknown savior. She must grab whatever it is, because she breathes a sigh of relief that ghost along the back of his neck. Then, with whatever strength is left in her body, she pulls back just far enough and sinks a jagged pipe through her thirium pump.

There was life. Bright and brimming and a system reaching out for his through their connected hands. There was an android, fierce and unyielding and determined to survive.

And now there's nothing.

Stella's body, eyes glazed and unseeing, slumps back down onto Tommy. He doesn't have the strength or the capacity to push her off, so he lets her limp head rest against his chest and tries to ignore the feeling of warm thirium seeping into his skin.

James is panting. His eyes, wide and disbelieving, are fixed onto the point where the bloody pipe exits her body. "Oh my god," he whispers.

There are no words to describe the feeling of something dying.

And yet, Tommy's system scrambles for them. It felt... like a light frantically blinking before winking out of existence. Like something frail crumbling to dust before his very eyes. Like a long, everlasting fall that can only end in the slow fade of awareness.

He stares and he stares and he stares. At thirium stained hair. At the jagged, protruding point of the weapon. At his own stained hands, holding her at the base of her back. At the half-hidden pictures of James and Joy.

Tommy is aware of very little. It all seems to fade into the background as his system deems everything an unnecessary stimulus. He's faintly aware of the myriad of warnings frantically popping up in his vision, although he couldn't even begin to know what they say. Maybe they're warning him of his malfunctioning auditory system because all he can hear is the roar of a rushing river.

His skin doesn't tingle. Not like when he touches Niki. In fact, it's as if his very sensory wires have been severed. No pressure or temperature or sensation registers to his hands. He simply sits, cut off from everything that could possibly connect him to the earth except for his thirium-soaked shirt clinging to his abdomen.

And then, with a choked gasp, he pushes Stella off. Her body slumps to the ground with a sickening 'thump', and thirium trickles out of her open mouth.

Tommy scrambles back. His slick hands leave blue handprints across the floor. When he's a reasonable distance away, he collapses onto his back and stares, unresponsive, at the ceiling high above.

A face pops into view. Wilbur, he identifies too slowly. Wilbur crouches down, and his hand, warm and large and insistent, lands on his shoulder. It hauls him upright, and he doesn't manage to suppress his flinch in time. He remembers what those hands can do, and his throat still aches from the strangulation from before.

Slowly, like sand trickling in through the tiny opening of an hourglass, sound returns to him. Wilbur's mouth moves, but it's a few seconds before he can even begin to hear what he's saying. "Tommy," is the first thing he hears, in Wilbur's frantic tone. "Tommy, breathe," he demands, although it feels oh so unnecessary. Why should he have to breathe? He doesn't even need to.

It's only at this point that he realizes how heavy his chest rises and falls. Wilbur's hand trails down until it presses on his chest. "Breath," he repeats. "What's going on?"

It feels unfair to ask that of him, when he can't imagine words come out of his trembling lips. He can barely keep his eyes in focus, let alone select words to describe the situation.

Because how can he possibly explain the situation?

The hand on his chest presses a little harder, and the pressure is grounding. Tommy pants, and he breathes, and he gulps down air like it's the only thing he was made for. And, when his tongue flicks out to wet his lips, he finally finds *something*. "I was connected to her," he says. "I felt her die."

Wilbur swears violently, although he can't possibly know the implications of that. "Okay." He swears again, eyes finding something behind Tommy. Only then does he register the desperate voice of James, although he can't, for the life of him, figure out what he's saying.

All that he hears is a single stream of high-pitched whining. "Okay," he says again, just to say it. "I'm going to call for someone to come help with—with the body. Just stay here."

Stay here? Yeah, Tommy can do that. In fact, it's about the only thing he can do.

Leaning his head against his impossibly bony knees, his eyes can't help but flutter close. And, listening to the choked sobs of James, and Wilbur's panicked voice, Tommy lets himself fade into unawareness.

This couch is just the perfect combination of too-soft cushions and rough, scratchy fabric. He sinks into it, head bracketed and supported by the mushy back. The blanket that is usually so careless draped over the back is wrapped tightly around his shoulders.

The second they got back—which had been far too late, after hours of Wilbur sorting shit out while Tommy stared, despondent, at the nearest wall—Tommy had promptly wedged himself into the slight crack between the cushions, and he hasn't moved since.

He's taken up the time old hobby of staring blankly into the dark TV screen. He doesn't even think that music would help.

Behind him, the sounds of familiar clinking and of low curses fills the otherwise silent room. Wilbur digs around in the fridge and, if the following sound of a cork being unwedged from its bottle, he's chosen wine tonight.

His drinking had been slowing down, Tommy can only note faintly. He can bring himself to turn his head, but he can focus his energy into his hearing. His drinking had been slowing down, and yet here he is, chugging directly from the wine bottle. At this rate, he's going to dive head first into an early grave.

Tommy swallows around nothing. All he can see when he closes his eyes is Stella's slack face.

"I don't understand," he speaks for the first time since this afternoon. His voice is scratchy and pitched low in the quiet of the house. Wilbur hums in acknowledgment. The glass bottle makes a noisy clack as it's set down. "I don't understand," he repeats. "Why you drink so much." His head lolls back, pressing deeper against the couch. "You're going to kill yourself one day, I think. Is that really what you want?"

The silence is unbearable. Somewhere, a clock ticks.

At this moment, Tommy has never felt so far from Wilbur.

"Good night, Tommy." The wine sloshes in the bottle, and the bedroom door slams shut behind him.

His eyes slip shut. *Stella's slumped over form, hair splayed out on the concrete and splattered with her own blue blood.* Tommy sighs. "...Good night, Wilbur."

Chapter End Notes

TW: mentions/implications of non-con, suicide. Two androids (both who are described as looking like.... creepily young) are forced into a romantic and sexual partnership with a man. Nothing too, too graphic (other than the death) but allusions to pedophilic beauty standards and non-con

I don't know why I keep doing this. I disappear for like a week or two, struggling to write a chapter due to a lack of inspiration or a lack of time or both, and then I show up with a ridiculously long chapter. Well, here you go. The longest chapter yet, ringing in at 11.1K. Someone please stop me.

But anyway! Techno POV!!! I always enjoy writing from his perspective. There won't be a whole lot of his perspective, at least in this fic, but here was just a little insight into how I characterize him in this. His relationship with Phil is kind of strained, mostly because Phil has neglected him in later years because all of his attention needed to go to Wilbur. Their whole family is kind of... fragmented right now.

And also, the boys are bonding? Kinda? At the very least, they are united in their interest in investigating! And in trauma! :)

One of my favorite scenes in DBH is when Connor feels Simon die. I know its not a very popular route, since people prefer the kitchen route (mostly because Simon can actually survive then) but I've always loved it. Such a tragic and human scene. I hope I was able to capture at least a little bit of it :)

unvoiced questions

Chapter Summary

Everybody decides to calm down and have fun little chats all chapter. Featuring concerned Phil, playful Tommy, and even more Niki!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Twelve: Unvoiced Questions

The air is hot and dry, and the soft breeze pulls a few strands of damp hair away from his sweat-soaked neck. The summer isn't over yet, and, the way the sun is beating down on his neck, it's like it's offended anyone would suggest otherwise.

Phil reaches up, fingers gripping the rim of his bucket hat and angling it, so his head is better covered by its shade. The oppressive heat of a dying summer and his sweat-slick skin could easily be solved by reaching out to the door in front of him. It's pale green paint is chipped, revealing a shoddily stained wooden door. The bronze knob, an ancient thing found in the depths of a moldy cardboard box at a garage sale, glints dully in the sun.

It's familiar but painfully so.

And Phil has been, and likely always will be, a coward.

The door seems to loom above him; the knob is far and out of reach, and he is tired. His shoulders are stooped with age and exhaustion and a bone-deep weariness that he has never been able to put into words.

He has been on this path before. He has waited outside this door before, stalled on the low step and stared. Nothing good has ever come of it, and so he simply stares. He stares at this now foreign building—a place that used to be so well known to him, a second home—and he imagines all that must be inside.

Phil knows—he *knows*, despite how often people like to pretend he doesn't, how often *he* likes to pretend he doesn't—the implications of his decision. It was not one that he made lightly.

But when Cyberlife came to him, with eloquently worded emails and a tempting offer to take one stressor—out of dozens—out of his gnarled hands, who was he to deny them? And he knew—*he knew*—that by agreeing, he would be signing up his wayward son for something he would *never* allow.

At this point, he had exhausted all his options.

And Wilbur remained where he was, tucked carelessly away into the dark, just out of reach.

While he did think through his options carefully—nights spent on his creaky sofa, hunched over with harsh, harsh hands pulling at his own hair until the strands got tangled and knotted around his fingers—he is no fool. This decision was made, primarily, because of a parent's desperation. He could still see it for what it was; a last ditch effort before he cleared his hands of it once and for all.

Which is a truly horrible thing to think about anyone, let alone your son, but it doesn't make the thought any less present in his head. Nor does it make the nausea in the back of his throat any less poignant.

With that thought lingering in the back of his head, and the bitter taste in his mouth, he jolts forward as another droplet of sweat rolls down his temple and drips off his chin. He puts all his effort into the movement, feet wearing down the familiar path until he stands right in front of the door. Before he can put much more thought into it—before he can talk himself out of it, like he has so many times before—he presses his thumb down on the cracked, withered doorbell.

It might not even work, for all he knows. He doesn't hear the answering chime through the door, although he does hear some soft, continuous sound. With all the self-control of a man his age, Phil barely resists pressing his ear against it.

He doesn't want to be here. He's brave enough to admit that, even if the thought is selfish and craven.

But he made a promise to his other son. He hasn't been the best father in the past few years. To either of them, he can acknowledge, despite the fact that Techno—to his immense relief and bitter disappointment—never seems to need him anymore.

Phil waits, body held in an unnatural stillness. There is no movement within, just the soothing, crooning noise. The breath within his lungs burns for release. It's only then, when his resolve is beginning to waver and his chest aches with the need to breathe, that the door swings open.

And, just like that, all the air leaves his lungs in a single, deflating stream.

Wilbur stands in the doorway, one hand gripping the door with white knuckles. The door itself is open just wide enough to allow a brief glance into his living room but not nearly far enough to get a proper look at him. His eyes are still lined with heavy bags, and the brightness of the sun only exposes his pallor.

But he's up. He's bleary-eyed, corners still crusted with sleep, and narrowed against the harsh light, but he's up. This, at this early time of day, is nothing sort of a feat.

His—admittedly natural—suspicion gives way to a blank surprise. "Oh, Phil," he says. His tone is neither horrified nor elated. It simply is. The tone of a man greeting his estranged father, although it pains Phil to think of it that way. Wilbur's hand falls away from the door, and it creaks open slowly. "What are you doing here?"

There's a tight lump blocking his throat. If he doesn't remove it soon, he fears he might choke. His lips stretch into a shaky smile that *must* look as fake as it feels. "Hey, mate," he greets in his best attempt at nonchalance. "I thought I'd check up on you. See how you're settling in with..." he pauses to clear his throat. Spit is thick in his throat. "You know. All the changes."

It feels like such a weak excuse, despite it being the relative truth. His words taste like lies in his mouth, bitter and nauseating.

It shouldn't have taken Techno's intervention for him to check on his son. It shouldn't have taken anything at all. Taking care of his children was the one thing that came naturally to him, despite their rough start. It burns a hole in his heart to see how far he's fallen. Guilt eats at his empty stomach.

Wilbur's expression doesn't change. There isn't even the slightest twitch of recognition, of the up-and-coming Lieutenant that loved his family more than anything.

Thankfully, his smile doesn't waver, although the pressure behind his eyes increases. "I know I'm a little late, but..." 'A little late' is an understatement. All Phil can do is shrug. "Better late than never."

He's always too late, the bitter part of him cries out. Too late to stop the downward spiral Wilbur had all but taken a nose-dive into two years ago. Too late to stop the bitter tension between his boys. Too late to prevent Wilbur's harsh words from pushing him away. Too late, too late, too late.

Always too late.

Wilbur eyes him for a long time. He must like what he finds—or what he doesn't find—because he steps out of the doorway. "Yeah, alright," he agrees. His tone is hesitant. "Come on in."

Phil still remembers a time when he didn't need to be invited in. He remembers when Techno and he crowded his messy house, tripping over scattered toys, and when they used to come over with no warning at all. The reminder still aches.

But when Phil slips back the entryway, the house is not what he remembers it to be. Not in the shining years of Before nor in the grimy After.

The last time he was over—and really, Phil can't remember when, exactly, it was, just that he hasn't been here in a very long time—the house was, to put it lightly, a mess. Clutter filled

every inch, broken furniture littered and obscured the floor, and a greasy film covered every surface.

But now, there isn't even a suggestion of that. The house is organized, and the floor is spotless, save for the two pairs of shoes set neatly by the front door. There is no unpleasant odor lingering in the air, clinging to the couch or to the carpet. The only smell that permeates the house is the faint yet overpowering hint of brewing coffee.

And—most surprising of all, although maybe Phil should've realized from what he could hear through the door—foreign music spills into the room from a well-known record player. He hasn't seen that thing in years—he had believed it to be destroyed, like many beloved objects at the time. And yet, it's back in its place of honor, settled on its little table for all to see.

A record sits within it, spinning lazily, and Phil can't help but gape.

Wilbur doesn't notice his shock. He's already striding across the living room to collapse onto the couch, gently clutching a steaming mug against his chest. His back curves in such an odd way as he tucks his abnormally long legs underneath him.

Meanwhile, Phil has no choice but to stand, awkwardly, in the entryway. It puts them at odds. Wilbur stares adamantly ahead, and, if Phil squints, he can just make out his muddled expression in the dark TV screen. Eventually, he slinks behind the couch and makes his way over to the crooning player.

The words of the song wash over him. It's in a foreign language—Japanese, if he had to guess—and the singer's voice is soft and graceful. The words just seem to slip from her lips and, paired with the upbeat instruments, create a musical flow. He reaches out but stops before his fingers can touch the player. "When did you start playing music again?" he asks, softly. His words are almost drowned out by the music.

Reluctantly, Wilbur's eyes flicker over to the record player. He brings the mug up to his lips. "Not long ago," he says briskly.

Phil manages to pull his eyes away from the spinning disc. His attempts to meet Wilbur's eyes, however, do not succeed. "What—"

He doesn't know what he was trying to say, but it doesn't matter. Wilbur cuts him off with a harsh look and a snapped, "Why are you here?"

He presses his lips together in a thin line. Although his irritation is subdued with the changes Wilbur has already exhibited—proof, perhaps, of Phil's plan yielding benefits?—he can still feel it. It hides beneath his skin; muted, but still very much present. "I told you already. I'm here to check up on you."

Wilbur sets down his mug a little harsher than necessary. The coffee inside sloshes dangerously, but the small, couch-side table it resides on is safe. "Well, you did it! As you can see—" he spreads his arms, gesturing to the clean living room. "I am doing wonderful." He grins, but it is little more than a harsh baring of teeth. The bags under his eyes seem deeper in the dim light. "Now, you can leave with a lighter conscience."

The familiar burn of anger builds in his chest. He wants to let it out in an explosion of fire and motion. He wants to scream at Wilbur to stop being so *frustrating*, to stop twisting simple kindness into the worst kind of insult. He wants to scream, but when he speaks, it is with a deadly calm. "Not everything is about absolving obligations." Wilbur sets his jaw. "And you are not an obligation, Wilbur. You're my son."

Something in his hard expression breaks, and he looks away. "It sure doesn't feel like it."

No. Phil's sure, too. He hasn't been a very good father.

He swallows the lump in his throat. "I'm here now," he says. "Because I'm worried about you. I'm sorry I haven't checked in early, I truly am. I don't have any excuses, and I'm sure you wouldn't take them anyway, but I'm sorry." Wilbur doesn't look very impressed, although he does pick up his mug again. Instead of sipping it, he peers into the creamy depths. When it becomes clear that he's not going to boot Phil out, he continues. "How have things been?"

It's about the vaguest question he could've asked and, by the face Wilbur makes, he knows it, too. "Things have been fine." He takes a sip. "The investigation..." his voice trails off, eyes flickering to some undefinable point above Phil's shoulder. "It's been progressing," he finishes succinctly.

Phil nods. Beside him, the music slowly tapers out only to be replaced with an even more upbeat tune. "And... Tommy?" he prompts.

He hasn't seen the android since he came here, but there is evidence for his existence. His excessively polished shoes, for one, as well as the sufficiently wrinkled couch underneath Wilbur. He doesn't know if androids sleep—and how could they, truly, but he's seen the way they sort of... power down—but it does look like someone has been laying on it.

Techno's words—as coded in monotony as they were—still ring in his head. He can't help but feel a little uneasy at the thought of that android.

Wilbur shrugs. "Tommy is... an android." It should be all there is to it, considering Wilbur's colored past with the machines. But the word isn't spat with the venom it usually is. In fact, it's not spat *at all*. He says it with a sort of neutrality that is completely foreign on him.

Then, something odd happens.

Wilbur opens his mouth to add something else, but his attention is quickly drawn by something off to the side. He turns his head, and Phil can only follow, gaping.

At the same time as a massive spike in the energy of the music—the swell of the energetic chorus—Tommy slides out of the bathroom. His black-socked feet carry him across the wooden floors, gracefully, until he meets the carpeted living room.

Phil can only watch as he makes the transition seamlessly. He moves fluidly, turning on his heel to spin in a perfect circle to the beat before continuing towards the center of the living room.

Despite the sheer absurdity that is an android *dancing*, Phil can't help but notice the changes in Tommy. Like Wilbur, he is different; he is not unrecognizable from their first meeting—which would be more concerning than no changes at all—but *different*.

His hair before was shorter. It was neat, painstakingly flattened to lay close to his head. Now, it has lost its smoothed appearance. *His hair*, Phil notes faintly as he looks between a surprisingly unconcerned Wilbur and Tommy, *looks like Wilbur's*. It's a mess of frizzy, unruly curls, and it seems like Tommy has done nothing to try and tame it.

There are other differences, of course. His posture, for one, is looser and less mechanic. His eyes hold a spark of some kind that Phil can't quite identify. It makes him look livelier, or maybe that's just the spring in his step as he approaches the record player—and subsequently Phil.

Even his clothes are different. Upon second glance, he notices that the suit jacket is hanging on the coat rack. That leaves Tommy in a wrinkled white button-up, and a pair of slim slacks. His tie lies around his collar, causal and undone. The ends of it dangle around his stomach, wrinkled and swinging with his every movement.

Tommy's mouth moves silently, although Phil, obviously, recognizes the motion. He's mouthing the words to the song.

As he moves, striding across the floor with speed and efficiency, his hands reach up. He easily finds the hanging ends of his tie, and, with deft fingers, he begins to tie it. In seconds, the thing is done up, precisely and neatly. Tommy pauses, taking an apparently important moment to wiggle his hips to the music as he tightens his tie.

Then, he carries on.

Phil glances to Wilbur with an incredulity. All he wants is confirmation. Confirmation that another living soul is witnessing what he is witnessing, that this isn't some odd vision born of too much stress and too little sleep. But when his eyes find his son, all he sees is a too-neutral expression. Wilbur watches with nothing that betrays that this exceeds what he considers normal. If he squints, he can even see the beginnings of a smile tilting his lips.

That, in and of itself, is almost as shocking as Tommy's display.

Crossing the rest of the way and passing by Phil, Tommy stops in front of the record player. His fingers easily find one of the many small knobs littering the machine, and he turns down the volume ever so slightly. With a glance between them, he grins. "Morning, Captain!"

Then, as if nothing was different or off, he continues to groove his way back across the room and into the kitchen.

When Phil looks over next, Wilbur is already watching him. He hides his amusement by taking a careful sip. When he lowers his mug into his lap, his face is deadpan. "Tommy," he calls, throwing one arm over the back of the couch, so he can more easily look at the kitchen. "I think it's time to put something on other than Japanese city pop. Something more

appropriate for our guest." His tone is carefully neutral, but Phil can pick out the teasing hints. "Like jazz. Old people *love* jazz."

"Hey!"

Tommy blinks. Then, his mouth pulls down into a frown. "No, you *bitch*. Japanese city pop is incredible."

"You've been listening to this shit for like... two days now." Wilbur scowls, but even Phil can see through it. It doesn't have the harshness to his brow that his real scowl has. "Change it."

Tommy wipes aggressively at the kitchen counter with a wet rag. "Yeah, well, you shouldn't have given me access to your full record collection if you didn't want me to use it."

That pulls Phil up short, and the small, budding smile freezes on his face.

When they were younger, Techno and Wilbur had a lot of issues. Despite their blatant care for each other, they were prone to arguments and competitions. Alongside these already wonderful qualities, the foster system had made them both deeply possessive of the few belongings they had.

Wilbur never quite grew out of this—although Techno didn't really, either; he just got better at hiding it. Nobody was allowed to touch his coveted record collection except for him, and he nearly bit Techno's finger off when he tried.

To learn that Wilbur was not only sharing his record collection, but that Tommy had free rein of it was shocking, to say the least. He can't help but wonder if so long without music had dulled his connection to them.

"I bought those records when I was at a really weird place in my life," Wilbur is saying when Phil manages to shut his mouth with a click. He stands up, setting his mug down on the table, and strides over to face Tommy. "And now, I'm regretting letting you have them."

In response, Tommy lets the rag drop onto the counter with a wet 'plop', and then he hops up two middle fingers.

It's quiet for a long moment. And then the silence cracks with Phil's stifled laughter. It's such an absurd image. An android, circling, serene LED blazing on his temple, flipping off tired, grouchy Wilbur in the middle of aggressive cleaning said man's kitchen. He laughs, and he laughs, hand pressed to his mouth in an attempt to stop it.

When he manages—not to stop laughing, as there are still soft chuckles shaking his chest—to stand upright, Wilbur has fixed him with the most unimpressed look ever. "Do you see what I have to deal with?" he demands, although Phil swears his eyes are crinkled ever so slightly. "He just recently learned that, and ever since then, he's been going nuts." He shakes his head in mock disappointment. "Quackity is a terrible influence on you."

Tommy grins. "Quackity is a wonderful influence on me."

Phil's visit disrupted the routine they had apparently settled into. Wilbur didn't even know they settled into a routine, but he feels the interruption like it's a physical weight on his chest.

But, it shouldn't matter to him. He has coffee buzzing in his veins, and that's all he really needs.

When he sees their desks—still covered with assorted trash and few throw-away files—he groans out loud; it's a deep, throaty sound that comes from the very depths of his soul to agonize over having to do work. His hands, rough and dry from the heat, run over his face in an aggressive scrub.

Because of their brilliant work—and the subsequent horrors they witnessed, the death that unsettled them so—they were gifted with three days off. He doesn't know whether it took seeing him—his anxious buzz that made his hands tremble or the evidence of his hair being yanked on in a frustrated frenzy—or Tommy—who, with a distant glaze to his eyes, was completely despondent—but they had been give a brief respite.

Wilbur certainly wasn't going to complain, especially since it was so vital. He couldn't imagine forcing himself—Tommy even less so—to work during those days. It was only on the second day of absolutely nothing that Tommy had even begun to snap out of the funk that had ensnared him, and it was only after a whole day of Wilbur blasting whatever records he saw fit.

And now, returning to their messy desks, he is confronted with the downside of their temporary vacation. Their time away has only accumulated more busy work than Wilbur is strictly comfortable with.

But what else is the high-tech, one-of-a-kind, super advanced robot supposed to be for?

"Hey," Wilbur says after they've long since settled in. He pokes one of the empty donut boxes crowding his desk until it slides across the line and into Tommy's space. Tommy scowls and shoves it back with narrowed eyes.

Wilbur opens his mouth—something like a command or even just a heavy-handed suggestion about to spill out—but he stops dead in his tracks. A stray, unwanted image floats by, distant and blurry, of Tommy's slack face as Stella slumped forward, limp and unresponsive. He remembers the way Tommy had stared, hands shaking and stained with blue.

He isn't going to enjoy writing that report any more than Wilbur will.

So, he changes tactics at the last moment with an audible clack of his teeth. Neither of them is going to want to write this report, but somebody has to. With a particular vicious gnaw to his bottom lip that has the taste of iron filling his mouth, he gets an idea.

Covering both his almost slip-up and the noise with an easy smile, he once again violates the sacred boundary between their separate spaces. His searching fingers touch Tommy's quarter, which he had settled down right within eyesight. "Flip me for whoever has to write the report?"

There's something surprised in his eyes, Wilbur notes as he examines the subtle changes to his expression. Surprised and grateful. It makes the tips of his ears flush red, although he does his best to ignore it.

"And what would the other do?"

Wilbur considers this. His eyes find the coin in his palm, cool and smooth. He experimentally rolls it around in his palm; he can't imagine how Tommy does all those fancy tricks. "Talk to Niki?" he glances to the side. If he squints, he can just make out her cell, tucked amongst other identical ones. The only difference is that hers is lit up, and there is a guard not too far away. "It must get boring to be stuck in that cell all day. And there's much we haven't asked yet."

There are so many questions left unvoiced, and so many that are new additions to the swirling mass within his mind. Their shitshow of an investigation left more questions than answers.

Tommy tilts his head. His eyes linger on his coin, trapped in Wilbur's fist. Despite having no way of knowing this, Wilbur is certain that he is running the odds. "Alright," he agrees. "Deal."

Wilbur nods back. It's an even fifty-fifty, but it's fine either way. Either he gets out of doing boring work to talk to an interesting—and somewhat intimidating—informant, or he does what he was always going to have to do. The only plus is if he can shove the busy work onto Tommy.

With a sigh, he precariously balances the coin on top of his thumb. "Alright. You call it." Then, without giving Tommy much of a warning, he flicks the coin into the air. It soars much farther than expected, twisting and spinning in the air.

"Tails."

The light hits it just right at the height of its arc. For a single moment, it's merely a glimmering point of silver. Then, it comes soaring back down.

As it lands with a sharp clack onto his desk, it spins uselessly for a few seconds before landing flat on its back. Wilbur sucks air in through his teeth. "Heads," he says unnecessarily to the grim face of George Washington. He glances up, then, to catch sight of Tommy's expression. It's anticlimactic in its blankness.

Despite the long and arduous process of returning Tommy to something resembling his normal—and it *had* been a process; who knew those assholes down at Cyberlife would program Tommy with dislikes—it's almost as if there was never any sign of it. There's no

blemishing mark upon his face, no twist to his expression, marring him as damaged, or even affected by the events.

He simply stares, eyes blank but thankfully not distant.

Wilbur shifts in his chair, feeling vaguely unsettled. "Looks like I got lucky." He pushes himself out of his chair with an ominous crack of his back. But, when it's time to make his way towards the holding cells, he hesitates.

Then, despite not knowing what possesses him, he reaches over and claps a hand on his shoulder. Just like he's seen Quackity do. "Good luck. I'll see you soon."

"Hello again," Wilbur greets when they've both settled back into—what are quickly becoming—their usual seats. The metal back of the chair digs into his shoulder blades, despite the thick layer of fabric that separates them, and he shifts towards until his weight is put onto his forearms. The metal table against the side of his hands is cold. "It's nice to see you again."

To be perfectly honest, he doesn't know whether it's nice to see her again. He can't tell if the excitement and anticipating swirling in his gut is for her or the possibility of getting answers. Besides, their last one on one—the brief span of time when Tommy was gallivanting off with George—didn't go so well.

Even now, Niki's blank eyes bore into him and the fake smile screeched across his face. He drops the look before she can call him out for it.

With a subtle tilt to her head, she considers something. He can't help but think she's assessing her options, weighing how insolent she can be without risking her safety. In the end, she opts for a strained smile that doesn't even begin to touch her eyes. "Is this becoming a routine, Lieutenant?"

"To sum it up in a single word? Yes." Wilbur avoids her sharp eyes, instead focusing on rearranging his arms so that the meaty part of his forearm rests against the table rather than his frail bone. "We need information on deviants, and I figured you could use a break from staring at a wall all day." He pauses, eyes briefly flickering up to meet hers. "Must be *thrilling*."

Niki shrugs carelessly. "It has its highlights." They both watch as her fingers drag along the sleek surface, nail scraping against it. It—thankfully—is too short to make noise. "Besides, I'm an android. I could easily go into sleep mode if I so desired."

He doesn't ask her why she doesn't then, despite the way curiosity itches under his skin like a particularly persistent cat. There's no way she would answer that question, especially

considering the distrustful way she eyes him. Wilbur may have saved her life, but she refuses to let him hold that over her, and he wouldn't want her to.

So, instead of the question he *really* wants to ask, he settles for something infinitely safer. "Sleep mode?" Once again, he is reminded of how little he understands androids. But for the first time, he finds himself wanting to. If only to place Tommy's odd behaviors.

Despite it being the safer option, Niki looks deeply unimpressed? "I'm sure Tommy would be more than willing to tell you all about it if you asked," she says instead of an actual answer. Her eyes slide past his and land on a point behind him. "Speaking of... I assume he will be joining us?"

So that's how it's going to be. His fingers smooth out against the table, nails clicking as he drums in a steady rhythm. It's an obvious tell, especially if you know where to look, but he allows him it all the same. At the very least, the motion soothes some of his mounting stress. "Tommy stayed behind to write up a report. We had a case a couple days ago, and we've only just now returned to work," he explains as minimally as possible.

Niki's eyes snap to his. He is unable to tell what emotion fills them. "A case?"

Wilbur dips his head in a subtle acknowledgement. Curiosity. That's the emotion. It's blatant in her tone, and she doesn't even bother to hide it. He sits back in the chair, ignoring the pressure on his back, and contemplates all the ways he can use this to his advantage. "I don't know how much I can tell you," he drawls. "Confidentiality, and all that."

"You don't strike me as a man who cares very much about conventionality." Her face is a perfect deadpan save for the single brow she raises in a truly impressive arc. Wilbur has to smother his smile with a harsh bite to his top lip.

"Am I that transparent?"

At her half-hearted shrug, he finally allows some amusement to show on his face. "Alright, fine," he 'gives in' with an exasperated sigh. "A man made two reports about two different companion androids attacking him. We showed up to check it out."

It's a gross oversimplification, but he wasn't playing coy earlier. The rules of confidentiality may be different here—she *is* an android in custody, after all; who is she going to tell?—but they still apply. He isn't going to reveal every dirty detail of the case. "And now, Tommy, due to the fickle finger of the coin gods, is stuck writing the report."

Niki frowns, although whether it's in confusion or disappointment, he can't say.

"And I..." he draws the word out like the dramatic bitch he is. "Have been granted the great fortune of getting to speak with you today."

But if nothing else, she looks deeply unimpressed with his flowery words that serve as little more than fluff. "Lucky for you," she says, anyway. Her hand loses itself in the thick hair that cascades down her shoulder like a pale stream. She curls a stand around one finger. "What do you want to know?"

And that is a tricky question, despite its deceptive simplicity.

The questions still coiled in his mind, writhing and wriggling, crowd his focus. Each of them demands attention in equal measures, but there's one image that steals it. The visceral image of a wild and desperate Stella, round face just visible over Tommy's shoulder, reaching out with spread fingers for the jagged pipe on the shelf.

He had seen it—the blatant strength of her conviction, the placement of the object she had placed all her hopes on. He saw both and yet, feet stuck to the ground, he had done nothing but stare. It had been, in more ways than one, an unbelievable situation.

"What do you...feel? In relation to humans."

Niki tilts her head. Her expression is clear, deliberating, and suddenly devoid of any previous tension as she considers his question. She almost seems pleasantly surprised, as if she was expecting a truly heinous question. "I don't think I could say. I can't experience exactly what humans do, so I can't compare it."

Wilbur nods. "Yeah, okay. That was bad wording on my part. But the question still stands."

"What do I feel?" she repeats with an odd look twisting her face. "Still, it is hard to say. I know the words for emotions—" she gestures with one closed fist. "—and I know what I feel." She gestures with the other closed fist, and then holds them far apart from each other. "But I can't always put names to feelings."

That makes sense. If androids are truly waking up and feeling emotion—which is still doubtful, despite how often people write doomsday, apocalyptic shit about it—they would be like a child in matters of emotion and regulation. They would be experiencing these new feelings for the first time without any way of knowing them or controlling them. A slave to their whims, despite the logic built into their code.

"That's understandable." He watches her, subtly, out of the corner of his eye. Her fingers work frantically and precisely, neatly braiding a strand of her hair. "Let's try this instead. I'll name a specific situation, and you tell me how you felt at that moment."

Niki opens her mouth, but Wilbur cuts her off. "No words that people typically use to describe emotions. I want to know what you *felt*. What sensations you experienced."

She eventually nods. It's a slow and hesitant movement.

"What did you feel when Carlos Ortiz attacked you?"

Immediately, her LED flickers to red, and it bathes her blank expression in harsh light. Her hands, which had previously been settled so delicately in her lap, tighten into fists. But, despite the immense discomfort so plain on her face, she closes her eyes in consideration.

The room is silent, save for the near silent hum of the air conditioning. He can feel it's breath ghost along his skin, and, when he scans the room, he watches as the machine rattles.

"I felt... a sort of coldness spreading through my veins." The sound, so soft and frail, draws his focus. Niki, still with her eyes squeezed shut, wets her cracked lips. "I felt like a newborn colt. My legs were shaky, and there were so many warnings crowding my vision." Her bottom lip trembles. "And I didn't know what to do."

Wilbur frowns. "Warnings?"

Niki ignores him. He doesn't know whether to be annoyed or to appreciate her dedication to his task, so he settles for feeling nothing at all. Except for pity, maybe. The lines on her face are harsh, and her eyes, which are now open, hold a faint glassiness. "I felt like there was this... giant pit in my stomach. And that with every passing second, it would only grow and grow until it eventually consumed me."

It's fascinating, he thinks, *in that disturbing way*. It's fascinating to think that fear could possibly be such a universal experience, the single unification between animals, humans, and, apparently, machines.

Despite the unwilling silence that fills the room, he forces himself to open his mouth. It's a challenge, especially with the tenseness of his jaw. "And when you fought back?"

Niki is silent for even longer. There is a blankness to her eyes, that particular kind of protective distance. But there is also steel—in the faint glint in her iris, in the tight grip of her hands around themselves, in the tight set of her jaw. "I felt hot where it was once cold. But it wasn't in my veins anymore." Her hand raises from her lap and presses over her heart. "It was in my chest, and in my head. It was everywhere, blurring my vision with tears and hatred."

She pauses, and an oppressive quiet settles in. Her hand grips her still blood-stained shirt in a vice grip. "I know hatred," she says, so softly it's almost lost, even in the stillness and silence. "If nothing else, I know hatred." She says it with such conviction, such absolute certainty.

And who is he to doubt her?

"I felt this itch beneath my skin." Her hand trails along her arm, in the place where the massive crack used to lay. The scar is hidden underneath her flesh, but her fingers find the path easily. "A sort of electricity within my wires." She takes in a deep breath that expands her chest. "I felt like I could breathe. Truly, *really* breathe, and like that air was tinged with sweetness. With necessity." She swallows.

And when she looks up, her eyes meet his. "I felt like all those things, all those little, impossible moments I had thought up in the thick of the worst, the life that could be. I felt that all those unattainable dreams were actually within reach. As if it wasn't merely the delusion of an abused girl, but something... almost achievable."

The breath is caught in his lungs, clogging his throat. He can do nothing other than stare and stare until the pressure in his chest loosens.

When it does, he averts his gaze, instead focusing on the shine of the lights off the metal table. If he looks hard enough, he can make out Niki's yellow LED.

"You're right, you know," he says when the silence becomes too much. It leaves him in a rush, a breathy gust of hot air. "You're in the right. If you were human, this case would be ruled as self-defense."

Niki smiles, bittersweet. "I'm growing tired of hearing that," she tells him. "It isn't nearly as comforting as people think it is."

Wilbur shrugs. "The truth rarely is." She doesn't have anything to say to that, and so he continues. "No court nor judge nor jury will ever see it that way. And if people only ever hear about violent deviants, then it's never going to change."

She doesn't have anything to say to *that*, either. She picks at a thread on the cuff of her pants, and it's only then that Wilbur realizes she has her legs folded on that uncomfortable chair. The edge of the cuff frays under her incessant fingers. The silence grows between them until it's some tangible thing. "Tell me more about that case. The one Tommy is busy writing for."

Wilbur doesn't particularly want to. He left the messy details out for a reason, and he doesn't particularly rehash images that he already frequents in his nightmares.

But Niki feels fragile, barely held together with dashed hopes and desperation. One more word that even alludes to her eventual damnation, and she will shatter before his very eyes.

So, he relents easily, with a downturned mouth. And, despite his prefaced warning—"It wasn't pretty. I'm not sure if it will make you feel any better"—he finds himself spinning a tale, including all the filthy details.

It's therapeutic, in a way. The words slip past his lips, eloquent and fumbling and rambling. He didn't get a chance to process what happened in the garage; as a police officer—and a senior one, at that—he had to jump right into action after Stella's body hit the ground. Tommy wasn't present, and James was blubbering, wailing mess, despite his being the catalyst for Stella's death. Somebody had to be the responsible one, and that burden fell to him.

Niki's face throughout the story is pale and grim. Her hands have returned to her lap, fingers delicately laced together in a firm grip.

He tells of the garage. Of the dampness, of the mold that could so easily grow and fester inside lungs. He paints a picture of a young—too young, with a cherubic face and wide doe eyes—terrified android who would rather impale herself with a jagged pipe than face James. He paints a picture splattered with blue, of hair sprawled out on a concrete floor, and of glassy, distant eyes.

But the thing he finds himself focusing on, the little detail that he keeps coming back to, time and time again, is his own inaction.

"And all I did, the trained police officers with intimate knowledge of de-escalation, was stand there. Completely frozen." He scowls, something deep and bitter and self-loathing. It's an expression that fits well on his face, a comfortable and familiar friend. "It was just the girl,

the man, and Tommy, scrambling over each other in the midst of a fight, and I just stood there."

Wilbur falls into a reluctant silence. Despite his words tapering out, his mind is still whirring, berating him for his idleness. Lost in his own thoughts, he feels, rather than sees, Niki's intense gaze.

"Are you afraid of deviants?"

The question seems to echo in the small room. It's an innocent question, spoken in a soft, unhurried tone. And yet it feels like a knife to his gut. His head, turned to the side, catches the one-way mirror, and he stares into his own face. His eyebrows, he notices, are furrowed.

"A little bit," he admits, although he has no idea what possesses him. "Isn't it natural to be scared of the unknown? Of the unpredictable?" He can't stand to look into his eyes any longer, and so he turns his head to look at Niki, instead. "Isn't it human?"

Niki stares back. "I don't know the first thing about being 'human'." And it's true. It's easy to forget, even with the glaring LED embedded in her forehead. "But I don't think they're nearly as unpredictable as you like to think. Nor are they irrational."

Wilbur feels off-centered, tilted and uncertain. He squirms in his chair, but it only accomplishes a deep ache in his back. "I never said they were."

"Then what are you afraid of?"

The air conditioning shuts off with a loud click, and the room is plunged into total silence. "I'm afraid of what they might do. Of what their existence might mean."

Niki tilts her head. Her eyes are sharp and calculating. He is reminded, once again, of a predator considering its prey, one paw raised half-heartedly. Like it's considering gently patting at a mouse to see its reaction. "Do you believe I am alive?" she asks. The question simultaneously feels like it comes out of nowhere and like they've been leading up to it the whole time. "That I have thoughts and feelings separate from my programming?"

It's a long time before Wilbur can even begin to answer. And even when he does, he doesn't have much to say.

"I don't know," he admits in a frail, terrified whisper. He opens his mouth to say something else—*anything else*—but nothing comes out. "I don't know."

When he comes out from the colluded maze of interrogation rooms, the first thing he sees—it's hard to miss the giant spectacle they make—is Tommy and Quackity. They're standing in

the middle of the bullpen, lost amongst the arranged desks, but Quackity's ridiculous laughter echoes throughout the entire room.

It's a miracle that no one bothers to watch them, although maybe it's because it's been going on for so long that the other officers have gotten used to ignoring them.

They're standing close together, sides almost pressed together. As Wilbur watches, Quackity throws an arm around Tommy's neck. He yanks, and Tommy is forced to hunch until they're on the same level. His free hand balls into a tight fist, and Quackity rubs his knuckles against the top of Tommy's head.

When he promptly releases him, Tommy's hand instinctively rubs at his head with his fingertips. His hair—which already falls under the 'artfully messy' category—sticks up in odd places. His frizzy blond curls catch the light, illuminating him in golden light. His smile is just as mechanical as it always is, but the longer Wilbur stares, the more he notices the soft crinkle to his eyes.

Like this, hair ablaze with the sun filtering in through the windows and eyes crinkled, he almost looks like an angel.

Tommy says something else, head bent to say it low enough for just the two of them. Even as he focuses on his mouth, he can't quite make out the words. Quackity throws his head back with laughter.

At this point, his feet are already moving. He weaves throughout the maze of desks, dodging more than one grumpy looking officer. "Hey," he greets when he gets within five feet of the duo. Tommy seems to straighten up a little, but Quackity only acknowledges him with an easy grin.

"Hey! Been a long time, huh?"

It couldn't have been that long, but considering they used to see each other almost every night—after that first time Quackity invited him out—it *has* been ages. "Well, not everyone has all the time in the world to laze about in bars," he jokes. "Some of us have to work."

Quackity scoffs. "Yeah, of course, *I'm* the one lazing about in bars."

Wilbur's manic grin softens into something a little smaller. "How have you been?"

Quackity's expression seems to falter for a second, but the moment of weakness is gone when Wilbur blinks. "Good, good. I'm good." He sets his hip against an empty desk that sits nearby. When their eyes meet, Wilbur can't help but think that his expression seems a little forced. "Things have been pretty slow lately, but hey, I'm not complaining."

Something is definitely off. But after his conversation with Niki, Wilbur doesn't have it within himself to question him. He does take a moment to look around the room, and his eyes land on Schlatt's empty desk. "And how's that excuse of a human being you call a partner?" he sneers, because he's Wilbur, and he can't help himself. Venom seems to drip from his lips as easily as spit.

Quackity's expression twinges again. "Uh, yeah, about that... I actually put in a request for a partner change a couple days ago. So, uh, we're not really partners anymore."

Tommy leans forward. His face is twisted in alarm. "What happened?"

Wilbur ignores that. He can't quite help the near feral grin that overtakes his face. "Oh, yeah? Couldn't put up with him anymore? I'm not surprised. He infects everything he touches."

Quackity doesn't say anything. He doesn't laugh awkwardly or half-heartedly scold Wilbur. And that, in and of itself, is very telling. Wilbur sobers a little. "Nah, nothing like that. The more we worked together, the clearer it became that we had different work styles. In the end, we didn't really mesh together well." Quackity shrugs. It's awkward and jerky.

And suddenly, there's this awkward tension to the air. It hangs between them and clogs their throats. Wilbur doesn't like the way Quackity avoids meeting his gaze one bit. He clears his throat.

"Alright, well. I hope your next partner is a better fit," he says sincerely. "We should, uh—" he glances over to Tommy, whose sharp eyes are glued onto Quackity's face. "We should get going. We have a lot to discuss." He raises his notebook up, loosely clenched in his fist. The motion catches Tommy's attention, and he nods a second later. "Notes to go over and such."

There's another awkward, stilted pause. It certainly highlights how much Quackity contributes to the general good mode.

Tommy leans over, taking a peak at the notes Wilbur had hastily scrawled during his conversation with Niki. He frowns. "Seriously?" he demands. His tone is both annoyed and deceptively light. "Your handwriting is illegible."

Wilbur stares at him. "You're *literally* an android."

"So?" Tommy sets his hands on his hips and in that moment, that small, inconspicuous moment, he seems so formidable. "Big deal. Those aren't fucking words." He leans over, knocking into Quackity with his weight. "Hey, Big Q, look at this shit."

Quackity blinks. His expression seems to soften, going from a blank stare to something incredibly fond. "Oh, yeah?" he grins and nudges Tommy back. When he leans over to see Wilbur's notebook, his entire face scrunches up. "Wilbur, dude. What the *fuck* is this?"

"Oh my god," Wilbur groans, hastily shoving his little notebook into his pocket. He scrubs his face with his hands, and when he pulls them away, he fixes Tommy with a look. "You're so cruel to me, you know."

Tommy stares back, unabashed. And Wilbur could've sworn there was some twinkle of mischief, some life-like spark. "Shut the fuck up."

Wilbur, looking at Tommy: Yeah, he seems like he's handling the incredibly traumatic event from a few days ago surprisingly well. He's completely back to normal

Meanwhile, Tommy is, internally, holding everything together with duck tape and force of will alone.

Honestly, I've really been jamming to Japanese city pop lately. Flyday Chinatown by Yashua played on repeat for the entirety of this chapter.

I promised y'all (and one in specific) some fluff, so have a gentle chapter with a lot of light-hearted banter (and ignore all the little bits of angst sprinkled in like seasoning). I think you guys are gonna enjoy the next chapter (mostly because of the character it kind of introduces) and I am so excited for chapters fourteen and fifteen!!! We're really getting into the meat of the story now!

I hope everyone has a lovely day :)

evade and capture and active highways

Chapter Summary

Wilbur and Tommy chase yet another lead in their deviancy investigation and meet an unlikely duo.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Thirteen: Evade and Capture and Active Highways

October 8th, 2038

12:43 PM

Somewhere along the line, it became their routine.

Wilbur would stay behind after the initial briefing, lips dripping with casual innocence and probing questions. Meanwhile, Tommy would slip away with their host's thin permission and do some questionable snooping.

The room he's currently sealed away in is sparse. That's the thing, out of all the possibilities, that his mind chooses to focus on. It doesn't look like a child's room; it should be crowded with mess and scattered with discarded yet beloved toys. Instead, it looks no different from the other bedroom.

Pale sunlight filters in through large, still open windows, bringing with it the damp smell of imminent rain. Last night had been a wet, miserable affair, and it seems, although with a brief break of sunlight through clouds, today will take after it.

A twin bed is shoved haphazardly into the corner. Its sheets look lovingly made, carefully tucked in, but some sort of scuffle has crinkled them. A soft, dark green duvet pools on the floor in front of the bed, hiding the narrow strip of empty air beneath the bed frame.

In the corner opposite the bed, a sagging, but still structurally sound, blanket fort hangs. It's ceiling and walls are made of a cream blanket, and the messy floor is covered with a thin layer of pillows.

That, more than the dull walls and neat space, is the only indicator that he is standing in a child's room.

Delicate lights are strung along the ceiling; they drape down in a way that is meant to be artful, but Tommy just thinks it's sad. Maybe it's because of the several shattered bulbs still hanging on the vine, and because of the shards of glass strewn along the carpet. He can only imagine what warm, gentle glow they would exude.

The picture painted in front of him—window open for escape, shattered glass hiding in the carpet—is not a pretty one.

Sticking his head out the open window, he notes the narrow ledge along the side. It looks too small for even a child, but, according to their latest informant, Cyrus, it was large enough to fit his child and his android. Tommy can only imagine what a tumultuous path that must've been, with rain beating down on their backs.

If he looks closely, he can spot footprints stuck in the drying mud. They're deep, leaving incriminating trenches beneath the drain pipe. Careful, to avoid toppling out of the second story window, Tommy balances his midsection on the windowsill. It digs into his ribs uncomfortably, but he ignores it in favor of wrapping a hand around the metal pipe. He jiggles it, or tries to. It creaks ominously, but doesn't bend under his weight.

With a faint, acknowledging hum, he makes a note of that. Their path is blatantly clear to him, although he loses their trail once they reached the cracked pavement.

He scans the street. It's lined with houses similar to the one he's currently in—paint chipped, roofs sagging in, and driveways hidden beneath tall weeds. But, just a little ways down the road, he finds a clue. There, standing proudly amongst old sidewalks and crumbling curbs, is a rusted bus stop sign.

That certainly is something.

If the android—Ranboo, if memory serves, an odd name given by Cyrus' own son—was attempting to flee with the boy, chased by his father, it would stand to reason that he would need a quick escape. After checking past bus schedules, he confirms that one pulled up roughly around the same time that Cyrus had reported their escape.

From there, he is, unfortunately, lost. He could analyze all the stops it made, but there are too many to be able to tell which they got off at. Additionally, he doesn't have enough information to make any conclusions about Ranboo's behavior.

So, with a sigh, he ducks his head back into the room.

There doesn't seem to be anything more helpful in the room. He doesn't spare any glances towards the mess—the scattered children's shoes, and the incriminating splatters of blood, although they are, thankfully, Cyrus'.

However, just as he's about to leave, hand clenched around the silver doorknob, he notices something. On a squat bookshelf pushed against the wall, tucked away in between toppled

children's books, is a simple box. Its wood is dulled with age, and its appearance, save for the shiny gold of the keyhole, is unassuming.

Tommy hesitates. Cyrus has been kind enough so far. He's allowed, quite easily, the android free roam of the house. He's the picture of a father consumed by worry who only wants his son back. It wouldn't be good to push too far.

But the box, and the curiosity itching under his skin, calls to him like a siren song. With careful hands, he pushes aside the books until he can slide the box out. On the very top, the child's name is written in careful—if not a little messy—glittery script: Michael.

His fingers run along the top. It's written in some kind of glitter glue, or puffy paint, and he traces the raised letters. A quick tug to the top of the lid confirms his suspicions—that the box is, indeed, locked—but after a quick search, he finds the key tucked into a suspiciously bulky book.

It only takes him one quiet moment—of apologies, of mourning, of grim determination—before he clicks the key in place and turns it with a sharp twist of his wrist. If anyone asks, he can always claim that it was for the case. He had to investigate everything, after all, for any faint clue to the situation.

Tommy frowns at the thought. He *is* investigating. It makes no sense to believe that he must make up some egregious claim. As if his curiosity stemmed from anything other than his code, from his drive to accomplish his goals.

Inside the now unlocked box, there is an odd collection of things. Bending his head to peer inside, he can only stare at the unusual findings with a scrunched look. There are several stacks of thick paper, and, on top of them, he spots a carefully pressed and preserved flower.

It's an Allium. It's purple, pointed petals stretch in every direction, with no regard for uniformity. To many people, Alliums are a symbol of good fortune. Tommy can see why Michael might've kept it. He takes a moment to pick it up, gently touching its paper thin stem before he sets it aside on the bookshelf.

Up next is a slim photograph. He's careful to grip the thin edges of it, even though his fingers would leave no smudges. The picture contains three people; Cyrus is one of them, although his skin is warm, sun-kissed, and smattered with freckles. He looks nothing like the man he met in the den, with his grey-tinged, sickly demeanor. Next to him, tucked carefully into his side with an arm thrown around her shoulders, is a beautiful woman; her heart-shaped face is framed by long, brown hair.

And, nestled between them with a bright grin on his young face, is Michael. He looks like Cyrus had described him, although words alone were not enough to do him justice. His skin, although taking the tone of his father's, is peppered with splotches of paler skin. Tommy easily recognizes the signs of vitiligo, even without having to be told by Cyrus.

There's one massive patch of it on his right side. It covers about half of his face—mainly over his eye, which is a pale blue and completely different from the dull brown of his other one. The pale patch wraps around his chin, leaving his nose and mouth untouched.

Tommy sets the picture aside. Underneath that, he has finally reached the stacks of brightly colored construction paper. The edges are frayed a little, worn down by what he can only assume were incessant fingers. He picks it up and leafs through the stack.

The first is a drawing, crudely done and with thick, spotty crayon. It's of Michael—who is clearly detonated by the white patch over his eye—and who Tommy can only assume is his father. It could be any nondescript white man, but the brown dotting both of their faces mimic each other. In the picture, the two appear to be holding hands.

With a pinched expression, Tommy flips to the next drawing. It's still of Michael and Cyrus, but gone are the friendly gestures and the affection. Michael seems to be distraught; his hands are thrown up in the air, and his simple expression is contorted in distress. Cyrus is no longer holding his hand. Instead, he's across the page, with a violent hand raised to hit Ranboo.

Ranboo looks no different from a typical android, except for his eyes, which—at least in this artist's rendition—are green and brown dots.

Unease—or the android equivalent—settles in his gut.

It's becoming a trend, it seems, if the drawings of a child are to be believed. Tommy's fingers are frozen, gripping the too-thin paper with a little too much force. Despite every electrical impulse traveling down the thin cords of wires running under his skin, his fingers don't move. It's like his body is protesting; the next paper in the stack, and the resulting doodle, are not for his eyes.

It's a dumb thought, though. He is not a slave to his body. And so, he forces his hand to move. On the next page—a delightful, yellow paper—there is a doodle depicting a predicted but still unsettling image. Ranboo lies on the ground, one arm completely detached and laying on the ground beside him. Cartoonish drops of blue drip from the wound.

Michael hovers above Ranboo, head in his hands and blue tears spilling down his cheeks.

The last drawing—which his body still refuses to view, even more so than the last—is of Michael alone. The right side of his face, where he's drawn the vitiligo patch before, is covered not with white, but with red. In it, Cyrus looms above him.

With a blank gaze, Tommy carefully arranges the drawings back in the correct order.

He doesn't have any idea why a child would draw this. It seems too far-fetched—too much horror fodder—for it to be completely made up. And it lines up pretty consistently with some of Cyrus' information; Ranboo had been in an accident a week before this incident, although the man claimed his android had wandered into the street to be hit by a drunk driver.

But Tommy is reluctant to believe it. Because the alternative—Michael drew these images because they truly *happened*—is too hard to think about.

He sets everything back in the little box of secretes, and clicks the lock back into place. With steady hands, he settles the box, and the rusted key, back into their proper places.

Cyrus must not have known about the box. It's the only thought that doesn't hurt to think about, and so it's the one he latches onto the easiest. There's no way he would've given Tommy free rein of his son's bedroom if he did. Unless he believed that Tommy either wouldn't check a clearly locked box or that he simply would chalk the disturbing drawings up to a child's wild imagination.

Although, that seems to be leaving an awful lot on chance.

With a swirling vortex of troubling thoughts, and a frown set deeply into his face, Tommy seals Michael's room with his exit. He needs, more than anything, to find Wilbur.

"Another one, then," Wilbur says grimly as he pulls open the glass doors to the precinct. Tommy follows behind him, face equally grim as he finishes the recount of all the disturbing things he discovered in Michael's room. "It seems we're unveiling an unfortunate pattern."

That's putting it simply.

The pass through the lobby in relative silence, and Tommy gives a brief nod of acknowledgement to the androids who work at the front desk. "Did you learn anything from Cyrus?"

Wilbur scowls. They sweep past the front desk and into the bullpen. Immediately, they're hit with the noise; the constant, dull sound of shuffling papers and low murmurs. It's almost comforting in a way that Cyrus' house could never be. It's quickly becoming familiar.

"Nothing," he spits out. "He just kept going on about what a terrible incident this was, and how he would destroy that android if he ever saw it again. He barely even answered my questions." He shakes his head, and they come to a stop in front of their desks. "Like a fucking politician."

It's a serious situation. Tommy needs to remind himself of that as he attempts to stifle a smile underneath his palm. *It is* a serious situation, but Wilbur's disgruntled expression will never cease to be amusing.

That amusement is wiped off his face when Wilbur stumbles, pressing one hand flat against his desk to steady himself. His expression is blank of all previous emotion except for surprise. After a terrifying moment where he doesn't move at all, his fingers rub, hard, at the junction between his eyebrows.

When he finally comes out of whatever spell had overtaken him—and it does take a while—he blinks. Their eyes meet, and Wilbur attempts a shaky grin. "Just a little dizzy," he says with all the bravado of false causality. To avoid Tommy's pointed gaze, he sinks into his chair.

It's laughably easy to see through him.

"Have you eaten today?" Tommy asks, despite already knowing the answer. They've been together all day, and Wilbur has put nothing in his body except for an excessive amount of caffeine.

Wilbur waves him away. "It doesn't matter."

"It does." Tommy steps in front of the chair, placing himself firmly in Wilbur's line of vision, despite how his shifty eyes try to avoid him. "It's massively unhealthy. And *clearly*—" he pauses, his tone as hard and pointed as the look he gives Wilbur. "—it's affecting you."

"Look, Tommy, I'm fine." Wilbur leans forward in his chair, brushing past the figure looming over him. He pulls a few irreverent documents on the computer monitor. "We have bigger things to worry about then... a little dizzy spell."

"Little dizzy spell *my ass*," Tommy grumbles, and, for a brief second, he swears that amusement passes over Wilbur's face. But he blinks—blinking is unnecessary for androids, but many tests suggested that humans found it creepy when they didn't—and it's gone. He sets his hand on the desk, posturing over Wilbur. "You're going to sit here and take a break, and, when I return with water and a snack, you're going to eat it."

Any amusement is long dead. Wilbur leans forward with a dangerous look. "What? Worried I'm going to interfere with your *mission*?" His lips pull back in a wordless snarl. It's the first taste of aggression from him in a long time, and, despite it all, it doesn't take Tommy by surprise. Not anymore. By now, he's too used to this defensive, wounded wolf routine to be fazed by it.

And so Tommy just blinks.

The entire office seems to have dulled in its excessive noise. He can feel the intense, burning curiosity of the many eyes locked onto the back of his head. But, when he glances over his shoulder, everybody's heads are bent over their desks in studious work. Only Schlatt dares to stare outright, and when he raises his eyebrows in a silent challenge, he eventually backs down.

Tommy turns his attention back to Wilbur, whose defenses are raising by the second. "No, you fucking idiot. I'm more worried you're going to kill yourself at this rate. Eat actual food."

Wilbur sets his jaw in stubborn defiance. Tommy set his as well; his entire body language is mirrored, even down to the deep scowl etched in his face. This is a test of wills, and neither of them seem willing to back down.

But then Tommy notices the deranged edge to Wilbur's eyes, and he softens.

"Look, Wilbur," he starts. His tone is softer, this time, and he makes sure to contain it to their little cluster of desks. This is the first time he's called him by his first name since the night after Stella's death—deactivation, his unstable system corrects.

It's only the second time he's called him that *ever*, and it seems to grab his attention in the way Tommy hoped it would. He doesn't know what expression must manipulate his features, but Wilbur's eyes roam it freely and uncertainly. "Please. This isn't healthy."

Wilbur's teeth seem to grind together so hard that Tommy can hear it. And, for a moment, he's sure Wilbur's walls have risen too high for him to reach.

But with a truly frustrated and helpless look, he nods jerkily.

Tommy barely refrains from cheering out loud. He can't quite smother his privately pleased smile, though. As he passes through the throng of arranged desks, he doesn't miss the way that the eyes follow him, all in similar expressions of shock.

He does meet Techno's eyes, just briefly, and the undecipherable look he finds almost unsettles him.

When he returns, a small Styrofoam cup of water in one hand, and two measly granola bars and an apple clenched desperately in the other, he finds that Wilbur is not alone. The police officer barely looks up at his approach, and his face is scrunched with urgency.

He doesn't know what to make of that, though, and so he looks to Wilbur. He doesn't look much better; his brows are raised in alarm, and he's sitting up, back ram-rod straight, in his chair. That isn't a good sign.

As soon as Tommy reaches their clump of desks, the officer leaves with a grim nod. Wilbur stands to meet him, although it sends his chair into an idle spin. "That missing android was spotted in the Ravendale district," he relays quickly, already brushing past Tommy and towards the doors. He nods a quick acknowledgement to the police officer, and Tommy can only fall into place behind him.

"That's great and all—" and there goes the water. At least a quarter of it sloshes onto his hand, wetting the edges of his sleeve. He scowls down at it. "But don't think you've gotten out of eating. I didn't go into that shitty kitchen for nothing."

Wilbur scoffs. It's caught somewhere between disbelieving and amused, and Tommy smiles at the sound. "Wouldn't dream of it." He accepts one of the granola bars with gracious fingers. "But if we get into a wreck, it's your fault."

They don't get into a wreck.

All that comes of Wilbur desperately crunching on the truly crisp apple—and Tommy would know, since he spent a good minute contemplating a line-up of bruised apples until he found the best one—and a crumbling granola bar is a bit more color to his complexion. Oh, and the fine layer of crumbs that covers his shirt, burrowing into the hidden creases. He gulps down the water greedily, even going so far as to lick the edge of the cup for any remaining drops.

Wilbur briefly meets Tommy's pointed gaze, but, after that little display, he quickly looks away. He probably doesn't want to see the smug look that must be twisting the android's expression.

The car pulls up onto a wide street lined with different shops, motels, and, most conspicuously, an ancient house designated to be torn down sometime in the near future. As the signs expressing this are just as old and riddled with dirt and age, Tommy doesn't think any of the residents have their hopes up. Wilbur turns the car off as soon as they slow to a stop, tires pressed flush against the curb in front of a small convenience store.

There isn't an aggressively strong police presence, which is surprising if only because of the sheer rush of the officer relaying the information. Tommy only spots one other cop car in their immediate view, parked on the other side of the street. There are a few officers milling around the wet pavement, one of which includes the officer from the Carlos Ortiz case. He doesn't know his name—something that *could* be easily remedied, but Tommy refuses, mainly out of a misplaced spite—but he spots the obnoxious red of his hair.

Wilbur's door rattles the car as its slam shut, and Tommy hurries to follow. When he steps out of the car, Wilbur is lazily swiping at his chest and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. The motion sends crumbs flying—a few bounce harmlessly off the car window. It's not the most professional move, but, at the very least, he looks a little more presentable.

It's still raining, but the sky's let up significantly; the tiny droplets form more of a fine mist than a sheet of water. Still, it slicks the road, dribbles on windshields, and weighs Tommy's hair down with a fine coat. He shakes his head out like a dog, and Wilbur makes a loud noise of protest.

When Tommy glances at him, his vision is obscured by the droplets crowding his glasses.

"Great," he grumbles as he removes them. It's rare that Wilbur wears his glasses.

Tommy doesn't even attempt to hide his mechanical grin.

"Lieutenant," Freckles—or so Tommy has vindictively named him—greet. His face looks almost sickly in the pale light. "I'm glad you came quickly." Wilbur's continued attendance—and at a normal time, how shocking—still must be a novel thing, but this time he at least attempts to smother his surprised look.

If Wilbur isn't careful, his coworkers are actually going to expect him to show up on time.

Freckles is promptly ignored. Wilbur instead focuses on rubbing the water droplets off his glasses. It seems like such a useless action, as water still continues to drizzle down from the sky, and he eventually realizes this; he stows them into some hidden pocket.

"Hello," Tommy greets for him. He receives only a disgruntled look, and his low opinion of this officer plummets further.

"What's the situation?"

The officer straightens up under Wilbur's—awfully squinty—gaze and plasters on a fake smile. He pulls out his little notebook, which is much newer and sleeker than Wilbur's, and flicks through it. "One of the employees of this store—" Freckles gestures behind him, to the small convenience store lost amongst a million other buildings. It has a wide front window through which Tommy can spot shelves stocked with food and flickering fluorescent lights. "—reported an unattended android with a child."

A direct eyewitness. Tommy perks up, already letting his program softly pry into the loose security measures of the store in order to obtain the footage.

"According to him, the duo came in about 10:45 PM last night, and the android asked for help. It claimed they had no money and no place to go. The man turned them away, although he found it very suspicious and ended up making a report today."

The timeline matches up with what Cyrus had told them. It still makes ice run through his wires at the thought of the man, but Tommy shoves that feeling aside. It does nothing for their current investigation, so he instead focuses on the footage. Freckles keeps talking—and god that self-important tone is burrowing under his skin—but Tommy tunes him out.

The footage shows him all he needs. An android—surprisingly tall and lanky, with messy blond hair and a facemask obscuring the bottom half of his face—enters, holding the hand of a small child. They approach the counter, although they quickly split off. Ranboo must be talking to the man at the counter, for his large hands gesture, but Tommy can't see his mouth moving. Meanwhile, Michael—and it is surely him; in a brief moment, he tilts his head just so, and the camera catches his pale, patchy skin—wanders through the aisles.

The conversation is surely not going well. Although the camera's eye does not afford a look at the human cashiers' expression, it captures the tension in his muscles. Ranboo's gestures get more frequent and more frantic. Eventually, he must realize it's a lost cause, because he slumps in defeat.

There's no sound, but, with what must be a call, Michael comes skittering out. Neither the android nor the cashier catch him tucking a sleeve of crackers into his jacket, but the camera sees all. And so does Tommy.

"He didn't see where they went, just that they crossed the street directly ahead," Freckles is finishing up when Tommy tunes back in. It's perfect timing, and Tommy lingers on the grainy image of Ranboo and Michael's retreating backs.

Wilbur hums in acknowledgement. His shrewd eyes, narrowed in the trained concentration of an investigator, sweep the streets. He must not find anything of worth, though, because he scowls. "Do we have access to any of these cameras?" With an accusatory finger, he points out several outside cameras, although most of them are pointed towards the establishments they're connected to.

"Well, not exactly." Freckles looks affronted, and an ugly flush creeps up his cheeks. "I'd have to go through the incredibly arduous process of getting each of their permission—"

Already, Tommy is at work. It's laughably easy to gain access, and, after a quick scan of all of them, the answer is disappointing. Tucking on the loose elbow of Wilbur's jacket, Tommy stands up on his toes to whisper into his ear. "The footage is... confusing." Wilbur stops, eyes darting back and forth. He leans down. "They stood under that bus stop to get out of the cold. At 10:57 PM, a regularly scheduled garbage truck pulled up, blocking them from view. It lingered for three minutes. When it pulled away, the two were gone."

Wilbur turns to face him. His expression is stormy and unreadable. "Garbage trucks don't usually make stops at bus stops, do they?"

Tommy shakes his head.

With a careful exhale through his nose, Wilbur straightens up. "Never mind," he says to Freckles with a dismissive wave of his hand. "You're right. It would take far too long. By the time we'd acquire the footage, the android could be gone." He hesitates, something sour pinching his expression. "Thank you. For the information. If that's all...?"

Tommy turns away to hide his smile. At Wilbur's gratitude, no matter how forced it was, the officer's jaw dropped in a way that was downright cartoonish. "Of course, Lieutenant," he stammers out. And then he's gone, leaving only Tommy and Wilbur standing on the curb. Wilbur fiddles with his pockets until he pulls out a soggy carton of cigarettes.

"I don't suppose they got on the truck?"

Tommy frowns. "That does seem the easiest answer," he allows with a quick dip of his head. Wilbur flicks his lighter, and the flame dances to avoid the falling water. The tip of the cigarette blazes with golden embers. "But I'm not sure. Most trucks are operated by androids, now, which would both explain why nobody reported this and raises more questions."

Was the android operating the truck a deviant, as well? Did it see nothing wrong with an android and a cold, freezing child?

A cloud of smoke curls from Wilbur's lips in a single, harsh breath. Wilbur tips his head back, letting the lazy drizzle coat his face. "Is there any way to find out if they did get on? Or rather, where they got off?"

Tommy considers this. Then, he says, haltingly, ambiguously, "There might be."

And despite Wilbur's perplexed look, Tommy is already lost in his mind. It takes a while to find, but he eventually locates the convoluted truck schedule. And with it comes a whole bunch of information. He learns the truck number, the serial number of the two androids that were on board—so they're dealing not with one possible deviant, but with two—and, most importantly, the truck route.

He traces along the route in his mind's eye, committing it to memory before poking around. Not all the stops are as densely populated as this one, and so few have the luxury of having cameras placed around. Still, he manages to catch sight of the truck in the grainy footage. The lanky android and huddled kid never make their appearance, though.

The next step is to check the logs after the truck had returned. As always, humans couldn't quite let go. They didn't dare place their entire trust in robotic hands, and so a human supervisor always checked over the truck to make sure everything was alright. Considering there was no mention of interlopers, he safely concludes that they weren't on the truck. Not at the end, at the very least.

Wilbur is still staring at him. The cigarette is down to about half of what it was, and his lip looks torn up because of incessant teeth. Tommy can only give him an acknowledging look before he dives back in.

So, they weren't on the truck when it made its return to home base. But they can't be sure that they did hop off at one of the other stops.

After poking around for a bit, he finds out that, like most androids, the WR600s were equipped with tracking devices. Unfortunately, Tommy isn't advanced enough—or this type of hacking can't be done remotely—to get their tracking information. He settles, instead, for the tracker they keep on the truck.

This one supplies results, and, after viewing its course during last night, he can confirm that it made no unnecessary stops or lingered for any longer than absolutely necessary.

Either an unsuspecting android and human combo were able to pull off a flawless escape, or they never even set foot on that truck. This, still, leaves more questions than answers, but Tommy is satisfied with his work. "It's unlikely that they got on the truck."

Wilbur nods. He seems to accept this answer at face value, simply because it left Tommy's lips. For a second, Tommy gets the barest taste of power—a portion, no matter how small, of Wilbur's trust. His head swims with it.

"Then that leaves us with no more information than we had twenty minutes ago."

It seems an unfair assessment to make. They have lots of information, tucked away into the nooks and crannies of Tommy's central processor. But nothing that leads them to their rogue android.

The distractions of the street—the sharp noises, the frantic movement, the clutter—clear away. His sensors take it all in, but filter away the useless information. "They got on the last bus of the night," he begins, mind whirring as he attempts to piece together this fragmented puzzle. "And they rode it all the way to the last stop. If Cyrus is to be believed—" and Tommy has his doubts, although for now, he can do nothing but trust his word. "—the android kidnapped his son, attacked him, and ran off."

An odd, unreadable glance from Wilbur is his only indication that his doubts are acknowledged. Wilbur, too, doesn't quite believe him.

It still doesn't make sense. Maybe he's just distrustful of Cyrus—*because of a child's drawings*, his system spits at him—but he can't help but see the flaws in the story. Ranboo was an AX400, a model designed primarily with the safety of their charges in mind. And

even if he deviated, it seemed unlikely that he would do something that would intentionally cause Michael harm.

Deviants often act irrationally, some part of his brain, that sounds suspiciously like Dream, whispers. *Remember Jack*.

And how could he possibly forget?

"It seems to be a spontaneous thing, although, without questioning the android, we have no way of knowing for sure." Wilbur's body is turned towards his. The cigarette is held loosely between his fingers, almost slipping out of his grasp. "He didn't have a plan."

"No, probably not," Wilbur agrees.

"He was desperate." Slowly, the profile is forming in his mind. Niki and Stella—his LED still flickers at any thought of her; although he tries to only think of her when absolutely necessary, she has a habit of pervading his thoughts often—are useless now. The best comparison is Jack; an android driven to the brink of a heinous act because of his twisted affection for his charge. "And he wouldn't have kidnapped Michael for no reason."

Deviants *are* irrational. He's programmed well enough to know that, at least. But, in almost every instance, there was a logical reason for their behavior. Twisted and messed up and unusual, for the machines they were, but logical.

And more often than not, at least some of their original programming remained.

Tommy refuses, for whatever reason, to believe that Ranboo would've harmed Michael.

This, of course, can only lead to one conclusion. The conclusion that he's been diving headfirst towards since he opened up that forbidden box.

Ranboo must've perceived some threat in the environment and removed Michael while he still could.

Despite his previous accident—which was due to a car and an absent-minded android, if Cyrus' tale was the truth—was his code still so intact that he put Michael above everything else? Or did deviancy twist him into something unrecognizable, his previous tasks and rules forsaken?

Something—some expression that betrays his turmoil—must show on his face because Wilbur frowns. "We could debate his motive for literal hours." Distantly, Tommy is aware of Freckles still lingering nearby, despite the clear dismissal. He watches with thinly veiled interest, even though his eyes are trained on his notebook. "But, again, it wouldn't do us any good. Every second we stall is a second they get farther away."

Despite a deep understanding of drive filling a better prediction of behavior, Tommy lets it go with his own frown. He understands where Wilbur is coming from, after all, and despite the itch to understand, he painstakingly shoves his thoughts onto the right track. "If he was

desperate and had nowhere else to go, maybe they didn't go far at all." Tommy raises a pointed brow.

If anything, their past experiences with deviants had proved that they didn't typically go far. Confused and scared, deviants acted very similarly to abuse victims. *They often are*, an entirely different part of his program whispers, half-unnoticed in its tiny presence.

"It's likely."

Going off the assumption that Ranboo removed Michael because of a perceived threat—Michael's drawing, the one of himself with the leaking wound, comes to mind—it would stand to reason that his first immediate action would be to find shelter for the night. After all, he went into the store, risking discovery, to ask for help.

Tommy scans their environment again. His sensors visually mark possible locations, and his program scratches them off the steadily growing list in the same breath.

The laundry mat is crossed off because, while it is open twenty-four hours, there's no way they would be allowed to stay there long-term. After a quick check of the security footage, he confirms that they never even set foot in there.

The motel, which seems like the best option, is also crossed off. On the glass doors, there is a small poster that indicates a forty dollar fee to rent a room, and another one that bans androids from entering the premises. But, as he had seen previously in the grainy footage, Ranboo was, quite plainly, an android. His blaring LED, uncovered except for the few strands of hair that would fall down, proved it.

There are a million and one hidey holes across the entire street, and Tommy's system does its best to pick out and eliminate possibilities quickly.

But, as his eyes run over the decrepit house, he catches the faintest movement of a curtain as it swings back into place. He narrows in on it, but it does not move again.

"Lieutenant," he says very slowly, voice deceptively casual. Despite every instinct screaming at him not to, he tears his eyes away from the house. If anyone is still watching him, he doesn't want to be so painfully obvious about his discovery. It's very likely that they already know—or at least, they're planning to flee in paranoia. Still, he schools his expression into something neutral. "I'm going to check something."

Wilbur catches onto his strange, halting words immediately. His eyes follow Tommy's when the flicker over to the house. "Alright," he hums. He drops the still smoking butt of the cigarette on the ground and grinds it with his shoe. "Do you need back-up?"

Tommy considers it. "Not immediately. If somebody is watching, I don't want to spook them before we get a chance to catch their trail. Give me... let's say five minutes." Wilbur nods, and with that, they separate.

Tommy strolls idly—as slowly as he can manage—along the slick sidewalk. Impatience itches under his skin. He picks up the pace the slightest bit—an indication, along with his

determined expression, that he is, indeed, on a mission—but nothing to suggest that he suspects the ghost curtains.

It's only until he's out of sight of the house that he crosses the street.

Rain continues to speckle him, dripping into his eyes until he has to blink rapidly to clear them. Tommy ignores it, hands shoved in his pockets as he carefully approaches the house. Thankfully, Wilbur isn't stupid. He's struck up a conversation with Freckles, looking serious. He doesn't even allow his eyes to flicker over to where Tommy is only a lot away from the house.

There's a tall, chain link fence surrounding the construction project—an ill attempt at repelling squatters.

His thirium pump beats wildly in his ears. The fence, while tall, is easy to climb by slipping the tip of his toe through the small holes until he can haul himself over. The pointed top threatens to catch on his suit, but Tommy eventually hits the other side with the wet slap of shoes on mud.

He immediately dips into a crouch, hand hovering above the sopping ground. His breath is still in his lungs, and his ears strain to hear anything. There is no noise, other than the occasional splatter of a car passing by. When he deems it safe enough, he makes his way across the bare, muddy yard and onto the damp porch. The wooden boards creak ominously under his weight, and Tommy stills. He barely resists the urge to swear rather violently.

One board almost gives out under his weight—a sodden and soaked one, soft and springy. His foot makes an impression in the top layer.

Tommy reaches the door, although at this point, he pauses. He doesn't know whether he should bust in, metaphoric guns blazing, or attempt to sneak in. At this point, he's close enough to hear any scuffling or pick up the trail, if they still reside in the house.

Gnawing on his lip, the impatience tickling at his skin eventually wins out.

The door gives out surprisingly easily under his shoulder, although the force he has to use sends a chain reaction of tingles across his skin. It swings open with a loud crack of the mangled lock breaking away. Tommy stills, then, and listens for any sign of movement.

There's none.

"Detroit Police," he calls out after a moment's hesitation. His words echo throughout the house. Still, there is no frantic scuffling; there is no sound at all, other than the echo of his own voice.

Looking around the house, it's clear that *somebody* has been here. A thick layer of dust has long ago settled onto every available surface, but there are areas where the dust has recently been disturbed. There are tracks in it—clear footprints hastily covered by jagged, jerky lines on the ground. The smell of smoke lingers in the air, and the dead—but still smoking—wood in the fireplace doesn't slip past his notice.

The chances of this being a random squatter are almost equal to the chances of this being the deviant.

But Tommy refuses to let himself be deterred. He refuses to let another deviant slip through his fingers. Out of the three deviants he has faced, only one has been captured.

He peers up the rickety stairs, which display a clear set of footprints in the dust. Tommy stares at them—at the clear evidence of something, some form of life, occupying this space. He doesn't dare move on before searching the first floor, though, lest the deviant slip away when he's distracted.

A large patch of dust in front of the fireplace has been disturbed. Possibly, a small, make-shift bed was constructed here.

Tommy quickly moves on. Underneath a large, ornamental archway, he finds an ancient kitchen, filled with long rusted appliances. There are no tracks in this room, only the lingering sense that this has remained untouched for many, many years. Sunlight filters in through the boarded windows, illuminating the dust as it dances, lazily.

Much of the room is filled with sheet-covered furniture that, when he takes a peak under, is rotted through with mold and moisture. Most of the cloth, save for the sheets that hide them, has been eaten away by bugs. Tommy quickly replaces the sheets; something about the holes in the cushions, uneven and picked at, make his system shudder.

His hand settles on the creaky wooden banister, prepared to hoist himself up the steps. There isn't much to the first floor, and he's investigated thoroughly. He's just set his foot on the first step, listening to the groan of wood beneath his weight, when Tommy pauses.

There, underneath the stairs that jut out from the wall, is a small space, lost in the shadow the stairs create. His hand tightens around the banister, and he carefully, quietly, retracts his foot.

With light steps, he creeps towards the veritable black hole; it's a black pit, dim and shadowed and obscured, and nothing becomes clearer, no matter how near he approaches.

When he's close, just within touching distance of the looming stairs, a lanky shape emerges and tackles the air right out of him. It's arms—for it does have them, thin and surprisingly strong wrap around his midsection. They go down together, and the floor is harsh against his back. Whatever this thing is, it's all elbows—bony and sharp and right underneath his synthetic rib cage.

The shape is wiggling, then, writhing on top of him as it fights Tommy for dominance. One hand presses down on his throat while its legs hold down Tommy's with their weight.

Why do they always go for the throat? It's the only slightly coherent thought swirling in his mind, slipping in past the panic that blurs the edges of his vision.

"Run, Michael!" The voice above him is deep and commanding. It's a smooth, low baritone, although, at this very moment, it's consumed by desperation and strangled with excretion. It can only be Ranboo, although Tommy doesn't have the clarity of mind to focus his eyes.

The hand—long and thin fingered—squeezes around Tommy's throat, and, like pressing a panic button, Tommy seizes up.

His system buzzes with adrenaline he doesn't have, and his thirium pump beats in his ears. He manages to take Ranboo by surprise, if only with the frantic force he bucks his trapped hips. The android goes sprawling off and hits the floor with a meaty thump.

A small shape—Michael, his system tells him, as if he's a particularly dumb toddler—runs past. It disappears into the kitchen with fast footsteps. At the sound, Ranboo scrambles up, hands dragging along the wood until little splinters lodge in. Thirium beads on his skin. He pays it no mind and sprints after Michael.

Tommy allows himself one moment. His hands rub at his throbbing neck, and air passes through his unobstructed throat.

Wilbur skids in through the front door, and it slams against the wall in his haste. "What's happening?" Like the well-trained officer that he is, his gun is already out and clutched in steady hands.

His appearance stirs something in Tommy, and he hauls himself up. "They're here," he only just manages to get out through the grim line his mouth has become. His voice is only slightly hoarse, but the repeated strangulations—and really, what the fuck is that about?—have made him accustomed to the sound.

Before Wilbur has time to react, Tommy, on unstable legs, takes off in the direction the duo disappeared.

The kitchen is a sealed off room. There is no door leading to the outside, only those two boarded up windows. And yet, neither Michael nor Ranboo occupy the room, though the dust that spirals in their wake does. The pale light is obscured by the silhouette of Ranboo on the other side of the windows, wedging one of the boards back into place before disappearing.

Tommy wastes no time. Shoving out with his palms, he cracks through several worn boards; it sends a sharp wave of pressure through his arms. The broken boards create a small hole for him to crawl through, but there is still the rest of the window to worry about. Cracked glass litters the floor and the windowsill, and it rims the window with jagged edges. A torn android jacket, stained with dirt and blue-blood, covers the bottom for a safe exit.

To put it bluntly, Tommy doesn't give a fuck. Planting one hand on the jacket—and ignoring the pinpricks of pressure, even through the jacket—he uses the momentum to swing forward. Glass catches on his skin, tearing clean cuts through his jacket and drawing skinny lines of blue.

Warnings pop up on his screen, but they are miniscule compared to the higher level of focus he's achieved.

Behind him, he can still hear Wilbur's muttered curses. They're quickly covered by the wet slaps of his feet as he fights against the soggy ground.

Just as Tommy approaches the fence, Ranboo and Michael land safely on the other side. Without hesitation, he threads his fingers through the gaps. The wire digs into his fingers, pushing shards of glass deeper into his skin. The blood slicking his hands doesn't matter. He hauls himself up and swings over.

The jarring landing sends shock waves through his legs. He doesn't wait for his system to recover; his shoes scrap along the wet concrete as he sprints. Wind and water batter his face, sting his eyes, coat his skin. He can just barely see the duo way ahead.

Ranboo is missing his jacket, which reveals an equally stained undershirt. His hand grips Michael's, and he pulls him along, despite how the kid flags behind.

They take a sharp turn into a narrow alleyway.

It takes a second for Tommy to catch up, but when he does, a police car kids to a stop in front of it. Freckles throws the door open. He glances, wild and desperate, between their retreating backs and Tommy's determined face. He seems to come to some decision, because he sets his jaw.

"They went that way!" he yells above the sirens and the sudden increased splatter of rain. Tommy doesn't need his guidance to know that—he has eyes, after all—but, lost in the thrill of the chase as he is, he can still appreciate the deferral. He's glad that even this stubborn officer can realize how much more efficient Tommy is.

His feet skid on the slick pavement, and the sudden downpour threatens to upend his balance. He catches it at the last moment.

At the end of the narrow strip—a small, gravelly space between two brick buildings—he can see Ranboo helping Michael over a much taller, much rustier chain-link fence. Ice spreads through his veins, and it temporarily paralyzes him.

Beyond the fence, he can just make out the blur of passing cars.

They're heading onto the highway.

Tommy slams into the fence just as Ranboo lands on the other side. For a moment, their eyes—both wide, but for different reasons: one is the predator and the other prey—lock. Their chests heave in sync. Tommy's fingers clench around the wire.

Ranboo's eyes are, indeed, two different colors, although Michael's rendition is a poor likeness. One is a murky brown, illuminating with hues of golden red whenever the light hits them just right. The other is a light green. Hazel.

Ranboo breaks them out of their temporary hold. He drops to the ground and pulls Michael into his lap. The muddy hillside aids their escape, and brown soaks through their clothes.

Tommy is still frozen. A sudden and intense pain squeezes his throat, blocking off his airways almost as effectively as Ranboo did. "Stop," he eventually gets out as he rattles the chain link fence. It's wobbly and loose, and it bangs against the metal poles that are meant to

hold it up. His voice echoes for only a brief second before it's swallowed by the sound of passing traffic. "You're going to kill him!" he protests uselessly.

There's a heavy pressure settling on his shoulders, and it comes with a wave of sudden calm.

He won't fail again. He won't let another deviant be destroyed, and he refuses to watch this kid die. He is Cyberlife's greatest accomplishment. And he can only succeed.

He doesn't have a choice.

The wet slap of another pair of feet alerts him to Wilbur's approach. His hair is plastered to his face with rainwater, and his glasses, which are back on his face, are fogged up with droplets and his own hot breath. His chest heaves at a staccato tempo.

"Jesus fucking Christ," he whispers in horror as Ranboo vaults across the concrete barrier separating him from the highway.

Tommy's jaw is so tight, he can almost feel the tension in his plastic jaw. He will succeed, even if he has to chase them across a rain-slick, busy highway.

Tommy hauls himself up easily, feet automatically finding the little footholds that he uses to climb. He's halfway up when his collar presses against the front of his throat and halts his progress with a sharp tug. He swivels his head, swiping out with a confused arm.

Wilbur has an arm extended, fingers wrapped in the back of his shirt. When their eyes meet, his are wild and desperate.

"Tommy, no!" he barks, like he's talking to a particularly disobedient dog.

The comparison turns over and over in his head, and heat builds beneath his skin. It's like his entire central processor shuts off, and he's incapable of logic. He is only what sensations he can feel. The cool, damp rain on his skin. The irrational, unthinkable heat broiling his gut. The gull pressure of glass in his skin, a foreign invader in his body.

Tommy yanks on the fence. His body jerks upwards, but Wilbur's hold stays and—as if he's a drowned kitten, being picked up by the scruff of his neck—keeps him in place. He nearly growls in frustration. That feeling—the desperate need to accomplish his mission—is back, crawling beneath his skin. No matter how hard he scratches at his skin, it doesn't leave. Not unless he accomplishes his mission.

"I can't let them get away!"

Already, they're making their tentative way across the highway. Ranboo pushes Michael forward and into a—temporarily—empty lane. The kid barely avoids a careening truck, but Ranboo is not so lucky. It clips his arm and sends Ranboo spiraling to the ground in a sickening spray of thirium.

Wilbur's fingers tighten in the fabric. "I don't think they're going to make it anyway," he says. His voice is quiet against the ever present noise—the downpour, the traffic, the volume of

Tommy's thoughts. His sad eyes are locked on Michael, whose tiny, child hands are desperately pulling at a wounded Ranboo.

Tension thrums in his blood. It doesn't *matter* if they make it or not. Tommy needs to capture them; already, the damning sensation of failure is settling on his skin.

His face twists in something. Swollen lips raise from under his teeth, furrowed brows, and clenched jaw. He doesn't know what it is, this odd sensation that overtakes him. He thinks it might be despair. Or reluctance, maybe.

Wilbur's grip seems to relax. It's a miniscule difference, and likely an unconscious twitch of his hands. It's all the slack Tommy needs, and, with a forceful jerk, he pulls away from Wilbur. There's yelling, panicked and outraged—"Tommy, you're going to fucking kill yourself"—but Tommy leaves it all behind.

He reaches the top. The pointed edges that run along it dig into his hands. And yet, at the moment he should be swinging himself up and over...

Tommy doesn't know why.

Maybe it's Wilbur's words still ringing in his ears, an echo of before, at the station. Maybe it's the way his breath sits, heavy and static, in his lungs. Maybe it's the desperation, the ill determination, on Ranboo's face as pushes himself, dragging Michael into a temporary safe haven just before a speeding, beeping car almost slams into them.

Whatever the reason, Tommy stalls. His hands tighten around the fence. Blue blood drips from his open wounds, trailing down his palms and catching, unevenly, on the metal wires.

The duo linger in the grassy median for only a brief second. Ranboo glances back towards them, and whatever he sees must spur him on.

Tommy can only imagine what his looks like—a blue stained mess, face twisted with conflicting emotions, and body tense to swing himself over the fence at a moment's notice.

Ranboo goes first. He always goes first. He hops over the metal barrier, and, with an arm looped through Michael's, he pulls him along. Cars blur past them, leaving them only angry and indignant and worried blares of horns. It's terrifying, this dangerous dance they've engaged in. Ranboo's hands are tight around Michael's shoulders, his arms, dragging him and positing him every which way.

Michael shrieks—it's the high-pitched, terrified scream of a child. Ranboo pushes him out of the way, but in his haste, he overcorrects. Michael skids along the pavement, hands scraped to a bloody mess against the asphalt. Meanwhile, Ranboo takes another hit; this time, he manages to stabilize at the last second.

A truck speeds down the lane Michael is sprawled in. Tommy hears Wilbur's sharp inhale before Michael's scream.

But Ranboo makes it just in time. He launches himself through the air, scooping up Michael into his bony arms as they roll across the lanes. The momentum of the spin allows Ranboo to push himself up with Michael tucked safely into his side. He pushes him hard, one final time, and Michael shakily hops over the final barrier separating them from safety.

A car passes between them. Ranboo waits, idle, and watches the speeding car heading right towards him. When the lane ahead of him is finally clear—and boy, is it a close call—he sprints and dives one last time.

But still, he lands, bruised and battered and coated with grim, safely on the other side.

Wilbur lets out a relieved breath.

But none of the tension leaves. Tommy shakes with the effort it takes to contain himself. The withered fence sways in the violent wind. And he lingers, at the top, a hawk watching his prey.

On the other side of a busy highway, Ranboo pushes himself up. Immediately, Michael runs to him, collapsing against his chest despite the mud caked onto it. His scrawny, bruised arms wrap around his neck, and Michael's hysterical face disappears. Without a single second of hesitation, Ranboo reciprocates. He pulls Michael against him with one hand curled against the back of his neck; and then, he buries his face in Michael's rain-damp hair.

Tommy stalls. And he watches.

And from his great vantage point, hoisted above the street and above Wilbur, he *sees*.

He sees the protectiveness that Ranboo holds Michael with, the shaky, white-knuckled grip he has. He sees the sheer desperation as well as the euphoric relief displayed in squeezed-shut eyes. He sees the way Michael's shoulders shake with barely repressed sobs.

And he sees Ranboo's eyes finally open, flickering over to meet his, one last time.

Despite it all—the disappointment curdling in his stomach, the frustration buzzing under his skin, the ice in his veins at the thought of failure—he can't bring himself to chase after them. With a breathy huff, Tommy lets go of the fence and drops onto the ground beside Wilbur.

He can feel his gaze; it's relieved and assessing and terribly curious.

But he doesn't dare look.

Eventually, Wilbur sighs. His hand settles on top of Tommy's soaked head, and that, more than anything, earns him a surprised look. "Come on," he says in a tone that could almost be warm. The hand on his head ruffles his curls, sending water flying everywhere, before Wilbur trails back down the alleyway.

Tommy glances behind him. He can't help but spare one last look at Michael and his protective guardian. Then, he makes the conscious choice to turn away and follow Wilbur.

Relationship with Wilbur: Neutral ^

Chapter End Notes

It took me a hot second to get this chapter out, even though I had most of it written for days now :/ To be fair, I did have to completely re-write my short story for a fiction writing class I'm taking because it was ass. Because I'm apparently a creative writing minor, now.

But it's Ranboo time!!! Here and gone in the blink of an eye, but that might not be the last we see of those two ;) Also, we have Tommy as Connor, Ranboo as Kara... Any guesses as to who Marcus is?

Anyway, thank you all so much for 10K!! I'm so happy with the reception this fic has received, especially because I was worried about how I would alienate a huge proportion of potential readers with making a story based on Detroit: Become Human. Your comments have all been so sweet, incredibly thoughtful, and I love to read them! So thank you so much!!!! I hope you enjoyed and that you have a wonderful day :)

the things caused by drunken confessions

Chapter Summary

Wilbur gets unequivocally, royally drunk, and Tommy has to deal with it.

Chapter Notes

TW: Self-harm, kind of? There's a lot of blood, getting cut with glass, intentionally grabbing glass, and mentions of suicidal ideations

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Chapter Fourteen: The Things Caused by Drunken Confessions

—

October 12th, 2038

9:48 PM

Wilbur starts early that night, and, from the faint, incoherent mumblings, Tommy can already tell they were gearing up for a rough night.

It brings an itchiness to his skin, and the slight singe of heat beginning his gut. He knows this sensation—if only in feeling, rather than in name—and he knows it leads to nothing good. Already, it's spreading through his veins, tingling under his skin. Its goal is his heart—thorium pump, his system reminds him—and his brain.

But since it has reached nothing as of yet, he simply sits on the couch, legs crossed together to prevent himself from standing up. Many times since Wilbur had started his destructive spiral for the night, Tommy has found his feet instinctively carrying him towards the record player. It's become more intimately known to him than even his own body, and his fast fingers could easily find any record within a second.

But with Wilbur stumbling through the hall, ducking into the kitchen occasionally to grab another bottle of whatever fits his fancy, every longing for music has been met with balled fists shoved into his lap.

Despite... whatever feeling ails him, he doesn't think it would be wise to disrupt Wilbur. From the brief muttered curses when his balance fails him, Tommy hasn't been able to get a solid read on his mood.

Wilbur is truly an enigma, he thinks as he watches Wilbur attempt to twist off a sharp-edged bottle cap—which, from its resilience, Tommy can tell it's not a twist-off. It's not the first time he's thought it, and it likely won't be the last. The man is unpredictable at best, and his system would easily tie itself in knots if he bothered anymore.

After the fifth time Wilbur hisses under his breath at the red marks that marred his palms, he resorts to using his teeth. The image of him hunched over the bottle paired with the horrible clacking noises of teeth grazing off metal is seared into his brain, even when Tommy looks away.

The itching beneath his skin only builds with every frustrated noise, and soon enough, he catches his nails raking along his arms subconsciously.

Angry red lines stare up at him. Thankfully, after checking his short nails, he finds no traces of blue caught underneath them.

It's at this point, with jaw tensed, that he stands up. The noises just continue to grate along the frayed edges of his self-control, and he doesn't know what he'll do when that rope finally snaps. Instead, he decides on the completely logical and appropriate course of action.

The lock on the bathroom door is rusted with years in humid air, and it makes a horrible groaning noise as Tommy locks it. But once it's finally in place, all of the air leaves him in one big rush. At the very least, tucked away behind a creaky wooden door, he can't hear Wilbur anymore.

He knows. Deep down, Tommy *knows* it's only a temporary relief from the stifling atmosphere. But he allows the indulgence for what it is and mindlessly mills around the bathroom. He doesn't know what he hoped to accomplish by coming in here, but now he finds that there is nothing. The bathroom is as he left it when he first did a deep clean, although the bath is looking a little worse for wear.

Tommy doesn't feel like cleaning it for Wilbur, though; he certainly isn't going to reward him for his bad habits with a shiny new bathroom. Instead, he hovers around the sink like an anxious moth. The light above the mirror—which is speckled with all manner of things, toothpaste most of all—is long and dim. It flickers with an old, worn-out bulb, but it never quite goes out.

It has the heart of a survivor, despite it all, and bathes Tommy in an almost orange light. When he finally looks at the mirror—truly *looks*—he meets his own gaze.

It seems too odd to be true, but the longer he looks, the more he realizes. Tommy has never truly stared into a mirror before. He's taken brief glances when passing by darkened windows or stared, deeply, into shiny metals that distorted his image. There was never any reason to, except to check that his appearance was smooth and well put together.

And now he can't help but stare into a—mostly—clear mirror.

His hair is the first thing he notices, and that's mostly because it is well and truly out of control. Wild golden curls explode from his scalp and catch the warm light. With a frown, Tommy reaches up. He tangles a hang into thick locks until he struggles to pull it back out. He attempts to tame this rat's nest that has decided his head is its home; his fingers comb through to press the unruly mess against his head.

Time passes, and the only reward he gets for his efforts is frizzier hair that sticks out at odd angles.

Tommy presses his lips together. Despite this raging battle, he decides it simply isn't worth it—or so he tells himself, giving half-hearted glares to the way his hair almost seems to mock him.

Instead, he lets his hand slip from his head. His gentle fingers probe at the skin around his eye. It doesn't behave how he would imagine a human's would. There's too much perkiness to it; no matter how he tugs and pulls at it, it bounces back within a second. No matter how it flexes and contorts, there are no wrinkles.

His nose is the next thing to fall under his scrutiny. This, too, he determines after only a few seconds of prodding, is not human. Tommy feels along the bridge of his nose curiously. There are no bumps or imperfections. It's not crooked with a past break, not even slightly like Wilbur's is. It has none of the ridges or freckles or blemishes that natural noses have.

With another frown, his hands travel further down. They slip past the fatty cheeks that make him look so young, and instead settle on his thin lips. His teeth, once he reveals them with slippery fingers, are perfectly straight and perfectly white.

Tommy pokes, and he prods, and he watches his reflection to the very same. He feels the slick surface of his gums, and the texture of his tongue. He has no idea why such a degree of realism needed to go into his appearance—his mouth, for example, is as highly detailed as any human's—but it's there. Everything is there, and his fingers seek out every detail with desperation.

And, when he finally slips his fingers from his mouth, he simply stares. His eyes, cold and blank, stare back. He sees no life in those icy eyes. He sees nothing in smooth planes of unblemished skin, and, in a moment of madness, he presses so hard onto his face that the skin retracts.

There are other ways to remove his skin. He knows how to do so manually, with a simple thought. But this way—through brute force and the tense pads of his fingers—is satisfying.

His skin retracts with the shimmering waves he associates with them, and when they're done, a face of plastic stares back. His head is stark white and bald, and the only impression of himself is the blue of his irises. But despite removing all the indicators of his appearance, he feels much more stable.

Without his skin, he can see the marks that mar his plastic body. Along his previously boyish cheek and down his round jaw, three scratches, pale white and thin, from Stella's jagged nails show up. It's the only evidence that she existed; the only evidence that she was practically a living thing, with thoughts and fears and fight.

And like it has lit a fire in him, Tommy moves.

He's long since gotten into the habit of removing his jacket and tie while at home. All that remains are his slacks and his pristine button-up. But he works fast. His nimble fingers slide buttons out of holes, pull at tight fabrics, until his shirt hits the floor with nothing but silence.

His pale skin warms in the light, but Tommy doesn't wait around to stare. He presses onto his bicep, and the skin there wavers away in a small, circular patch of pressure. Within it, he can see the square scar from Jack's bullet tearing into the side of his arm. His thumb follows the bone in his arm, and, like a small flashlight in a dark room, it illuminates what's underneath. As he reaches his forearm, he finds more coarse scratches from Stella.

Tommy doesn't know what to call the sensation gripping his thirium pump in a tight vice. He thinks it might be grief, but he knows it can't be.

Software Instability: ^

With a virtual wave of his hand, the notification disappears. He doesn't know what it said, but he doesn't care to. His eyes are locked onto the pale scars that, more than anything, identify him. Even if he were to be stripped away of his skin and hair and nose and eyes, the marks—the last reminders of forgotten androids—would still be ingrained in his body. He would still be himself.

And for some reason, that's enough.

Through the haze of euphoria, he stoops down. His eyes never quite leave the mirror, even if his body does, and when he returns back to the rectangle of reflection, his shirt is back over his shoulders. Slowly, distantly, Tommy buttons up his shirt. His fingers brush against his neck as he fixes the collar, but he doesn't even feel it.

Then, when both sets of his eyes meet in the mirror, he smiles. He has no idea what compels him—the unnatural stillness to his face, perhaps—but he doesn't feel any more comfortable after.

His smile doesn't look natural at all. Never mind his flawless teeth or his straight nose or his unblemished skin. His smile is the most unnatural thing about him. It's too perfect, too symmetrical, and his eyes—void of anything at all—don't show the mirth he's supposedly feeling. There are no gentle wrinkles around the edges of his eyes—laugh lines or crow's feet or whatever other names humans have given them.

There is only smooth skin and his too-perfect smile.

It's isn't how a smile is supposed to look. Tommy thinks of Quackity's smile. He thinks of the dimples forming above the corner of his mouth. He thinks of the glint of teeth when he's

particularly amused, almost like it's a reward for making him laugh. He pictures the way that sometimes, when he laughs too hard, his eyes narrow to thin, dark slits.

The pads of his fingers prod at his cheeks again. They target the muscles that would gather around his mouth, if he was human. When smiles, he keeps Quackity's grinning face in mind.

The resulting look is far too happy. Tommy looks like some demented animatronic with a manic expression permanently twisting his features. There's too much teeth, he notes with virtually no change to said expression, except for a distressed furrowing of his brow. There's too much teeth and absolutely nothing happening with the top half of his face.

With a shudder, he lets his expression relax back into neutrality.

This time, Tommy focuses on his eyes. He narrows them and widens them and looks every which way until, eventually, he learns the feeling for scrunching them. *It does look better*, he notes with occasional twitches to his eyes. But it feels odd. The expression is forced and too artificial.

He thinks of Wilbur. When he smiles—a rare treat, since it happens occasionally—he typically raises one corner into a sort of lopsided smirk. None of his smiles are perfect, but whenever he does it, there's *feeling* behind it. He doesn't smile for show—unless, of course, it is for show, and he's crafting some kind persona to aid their investigation. If Wilbur smiles, it's because something or someone has truly earned it.

But, no matter what Tommy tries, he can't even begin to replicate it. There's something about its lopsided, imperfectness that he can't capture. And all his pathetic attempts only serve as fuel to the dying kindling of his irritation.

Before he can make another attempt, he's interrupted by a sudden and harsh knock. It echoes throughout the small bathroom, bouncing off the tile backsplash. Tommy jumps a little, elbows banging into the counter. He swears, low and under his breath, despite no pain radiating through his limbs.

Yanking open the bathroom door reveals a swaying Wilbur whose vacant eyes latch onto him with some trouble. His reaction is delayed, but his eyes eventually narrow. "What are you doing in the bathroom?" he slurs, head tilted like a confused puppy. One of his hands shoots out to brace himself on the doorframe.

Tommy can only scowl faintly. It's all setting in on him now—the frustration of the night, his annoyance at being unable to mimic a simple smile, the irritation of being interrupted during... whatever madness had temporarily captivated him. He brushes past Wilbur, and their shoulders collide forcefully. Wilbur has to tighten his grip around the door to keep from losing his balance.

"Android things," he replies curtly.

Wilbur evidentially doesn't care enough to ask—or he's focused on much more pressing things—because he disappears with a rattling slam of the door. Tommy collapses onto the

couch.

Underneath his skin, he feels the faint thrum of his thirium in his veins. He feels that heat again, singeing his skin and making its way towards his head. It's already heady and distracting, but he can't imagine what it will be like if it reaches its destination. His hands involuntarily curl and uncurl rapidly, and his short nails dig into his palm.

A sudden impatience pushes up against him; it clogs his throat and twists his features. He hears the flush of the toilet, distantly, and pushes himself off the couch.

Without much further thought—about the odd mood Wilbur's put himself in, about the heat beneath his skin, about actions and their consequences—he makes a decision. It's, simply and sweet, to fuck it.

He chooses a record at random, letting the slim disc slide out of its sleeve and into his waiting hands. He quickly sets it in place, and then turns the volume up as loud as he dares—which is, surprisingly, pretty loud.

At this point, with music filling the silence, Tommy doesn't even hear Wilbur exit the bathroom. He does notice him when he enters the kitchen again, moving unsteadily in the corner of his eye. But Tommy, full of a simmering heat and the steady beat of the music, doesn't even look at him. Instead, he hunches over the music stand, gently resting his forehead against the record player until he can feel the vibrations in his head.

Time seems to pass after that, although he honestly loses track of it. It's only him, the beat traveling through his still body, and the distant sounds of Wilbur traveling between his room and the kitchen. The music soothes him in a way that words and his own swirling thoughts never could, and with every new wave, every new song, he finds his shoulders a little less tense.

That is, until the sound of glass shattering on the floor pulls him out of whatever trance he's managed to lull himself into.

Tommy bolts up, fingers automatically finding the knob that controls volume and turning it down. Wilbur is standing in the kitchen, and although his hands are empty, they're curled loosely as if he had been holding something. As Tommy nears the kitchen, he finds that this was, indeed, the case.

One of the bottles must've been wine, because a deep red liquid coats the majority of the floor. The way it pools on the stark floor reminds him of blood, as do the splatters that mark the base of the counter and the metal fridge. Fragments of shattered glass, a stray cork, and a spinning bottle cap all float on the surface as the liquid continues on its staining path.

Wilbur can only stare, mouth slightly agape. His wide eyes blink several times, as if even his drunk self is reeling for sobriety. Behind them, the record player crackles ominously in between songs.

And then, before Tommy can open his mouth—before he can even begin to formulate a response to this absolute mess—Wilbur, unstable from the drink spinning his head, loses his

balance.

It's almost like a movie, the way he stagger-steps in a pathetic attempt to catch himself. But, before the thought of using his hands can pass through his head as slow as molasses, his feet slip on the pooling wine.

Wilbur collapses onto his back, and the fall knocks the air out of his lungs in a single, airy noise. His head had the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and it connects, rather solidly, with the front of the refrigerator. His curls drag through the wine covering the surface like blood splatters. He groans, long and pained, but Wilbur doesn't make any attempt to get up. He gives into the floor, arms splayed out like a confused starfish.

And then, while Tommy is still recovering from shock, the laughter starts.

The noise is a high-pitched, hiccupping giggle that fills the air. Wilbur finally brings a hand up to his head, and he rubs at what must already be a sore spot. But his face is twisted in glee, eyes nearly squeezed shut from the laughter that rattles his entire body.

It's that—the sight of Wilbur's carefree, lopsided grin—that finally spurs him into action. Tommy swears, low and under his breath, as he navigates the minefield that is shattered glass coating the sticky remains of the wine flood. He remains unharmed by seeking out glass-free splotches, but the area closest to Wilbur is evenly covered. With a deep scowl, he gives in, knocking aside glass with his socked foot and damning the consequences.

Already, his socks are wet with alcohol, and glass shards tear into the fabric.

Wilbur is still giggling when Tommy reaches him. "Are you okay?" he demands, crouching down unsteadily, despite the perfect balance built into his code. His hands seek out the fridge first, confirming that there's no blood intermixed with the wine.

"My life's a fucking joke," Wilbur cackles, letting his reluctantly raised head drop back down. It hits the fridge again with a meaty thud that only makes him laugh harder.

Nothing in his programming could possibly prepare him for this situation. There's no code on how to deal with it; no program to dictate how to react and what to say. Tommy can see tears forming in Wilbur's eyes, pushed out through the narrowed slits and crawling down his cheeks. His laughter is turning breathless now.

He's sure they make quite the scene; two detectives, sprawled out on a glass-ridden, wine-soaked kitchen floor. One's absolutely drunk off his ass, no noise leaving his open mouth except for a squeaky wheeze. The other is helpless, soles of his feet leaking blue.

"Wilbur," Tommy says. He doesn't know what tone he was going for. He's not entirely sure how it came across when he left his lips. Helpless, maybe. A desperate pleading for Wilbur to do something, *anything*, to help Tommy understand. Or maybe it sounded stern. He hopes it sounded stern. At least then it would seem like he's in control of the situation. "You're life's—you're life's not a joke."

It sounds pathetic and weak, even to his own ears, but what else is he supposed to say? He certainly can't *agree* with him, although the image of him—laughing his ass off, sprawled out on the floor with the tough skin of his feet bleeding from shallow cuts—certainly doesn't help.

The laughter is beginning to worry him, now. It's been going on for too long, and it's clear that Wilbur is having trouble taking in air through his breathless wheeze.

And all Tommy can do—the most advanced prototype ever built—is sit on the floor beside him and sneak a hand underneath him to awkwardly rub at his back.

It takes a while—they go through four songs on the album—but this seems to do the trick. His giggles subside, even if they go in waves separated by a few haggard, gasping breaths until he found something new that was entirely too funny.

Now, he's quiet, save for his shaky breaths, and Tommy gets a single moment of peace. With it, he brings his hand up behind Wilbur's head. His fingers probe at the back of his head; he finds a nasty bump, but his fingers are clean when he pulls them away. Tommy sighs with relief. He can't imagine tending to a head wound while Wilbur is like this.

When he pulls back, intent on checking out the bottoms of his feet, Wilbur's eyes are locked on his face. They're intense, suddenly too focused and clear, and he watches as Tommy awkwardly scoots across the wine-slick floor. Little shards of glass eat into his skin, and Tommy pulls his hands away with a hiss. Thirium is already leaking from the shallow cuts, but as soon as he picks out the bigger shards, the wounds seal themselves.

After checking on Wilbur's feet, he finds that the wounds aren't too severe. Hardly any blood tricks down his heel, which is a relief. They are, however, many, and they'll be a pain to take care of. Their location also causes problems, since it means Tommy has to convince a drunk Wilbur to stay seated long enough to clean and dress them.

Tommy rises, unsteadily, to his feet. The glass digs further into his soles, but he doesn't pay any attention to it. "Stay here," he says. This time, he's sure he sounds stern. "If you stand up, you'll hurt yourself even worse."

Thankfully, he doesn't have to travel very far. There's a battered old first aid kit in the cabinet above the microwave, and, after a quick check, it has a pair of tweezers in it. With a torn paper towel in his fist, he settles back into an uneasy crouch. Propping one of Wilbur's legs up onto his lap, he closes the tiny iron tongs around a shard and gently starts to work it out of the skin.

"What does it matter?" Wilbur's voice is rough; his throat is weathered and scratched raw by his unstoppable laughter—the madness that had temporarily consumed him. It seems, however, that it's not quite done with him, despite the bone-weary exhaustion that seems to grip him. There's still a grim grin on his face, the ghost of manic amusement. "It's not like I'll need them."

Tommy frowns. "You *do* need them."

Wilbur shakes his head. He seems unusually sober in that moment, despite the drink still glazing his eyes. "Not anymore," he says solemnly. Ever so slowly, the paper towel becomes littered with bloodied shards of glass. Tommy watches his face closely, but no pain ever flutters across Wilbur's face. Although he can't be sure that isn't due to the alcohol dulling his nerves. "What do I need them for? Work?" He scoffs, as if even the mere word has offended him.

"Yes. Work," Tommy agrees.

Wilbur kicks out with his foot, and, for one moment, Tommy is sure he's trying to wiggle away. But after a few seconds, he stills, and it becomes clear that he was just readjusting into a more comfortable position. After a quick glance at his face, Wilbur seems unphased, unbothered. Slumped against the wall with his head bent at an odd angle, he looks almost content. "What do I need to work for anymore? They certainly don't need me."

"They do. You're a good detective, you know."

Wilbur scoffs again. This time seems harder, rougher against the delicate skin of his throat. Just from the tone of voice alone, he can't tell what emotions plague him. "I used to be. Back before—before—" he cuts off, eyes watching some far-off space with intensity. "Well, it doesn't matter anymore. Any skill I once had is useless compared to you."

Tommy stills. His eyes find Wilbur's, and his expression is painted with so many emotions—bitterness, and reluctance, mainly. "What do you mean?"

Wilbur rolls his eyes so deeply in his skull. It looks like it hurts. "Like I have to tell you." Before Wilbur can fix him with whatever look settles in on his face—Tommy's social program wants to call it fondness or affection, but that can't be true—he resumes his work. His limbs are heavy with dread, though, and he ends up accidentally dragging a jagged piece across his heel.

Wilbur doesn't even notice. "You're incredible. So much knowledge in such an unassuming body." He leans forward with shaky hands, and his fingers, sticky with wine, gently tap against his temple. "A whole database right here." His thumb brushes over Tommy's LED, and he hums as it flickers yellow. "Don't pretend you need me for this case. If anything, I'm holding you back. The police department would be fucked if they made more of you."

And that's an idea. More of him. He's one of a kind, or so far, until—and if—they decide to mass produce him. Something ugly twists in his gut at the thought, and he turns his face away before Wilbur can see. There's a buzzing warmth that starts in his ears and spreads to his face slowly, like diffusing tea.

Tommy hasn't seen many sides to Wilbur, not in the grand scheme of things. He's seen a spiteful, bitter Wilbur who explodes with anger. He's seen a snide, snarky Wilbur who spews poison from his lips as easily as breathing. He's seen a distressed, unsure Wilbur, out of his depth in a deviant investigation.

But this Wilbur—mopey with alcohol, free with affection, and simultaneously singing Tommy's praises and lamenting over his own shortcomings and insecurities—is new. It's

something he has no idea how to handle, which seems to be the fucking theme of the night.

Not that he's ever known how to handle Wilbur, but he thought he'd learned something in all his time here. And maybe he has. There, tucked away with all the other information he's gathered, is a big file labeled 'Wilbur'.

He knows, at the very least, that Wilbur doesn't like to be coddled. He doesn't like to be treated with gentle hands, even if sometimes he seems like he's going to shatter in bitter fragments and blow away in the wind. It's easy to see in his positive interactions with Quackity, who is painfully blunt; it's even easier to see in his negative interactions with Phil.

But Tommy, in all his apparent wisdom, doesn't have an answer. He doesn't even have a hint, the tiniest suggestion of what to say. He can only sit in silence, and let his eyes sweep appraisingly over the shallow, sluggishly bleeding wounds of his now glass-free foot. They're not bleeding enough to be a significant worry, and, at this point, Tommy is much more concerned with removing all the glass before Wilbur tries to stand.

With a shaky breath, he swipes a hand across the floor. It sends wine and glass shards skittering towards the living room, and it leaves shallow cuts that squeeze drops of thirium out before closing. But the result is a relatively clear section of the floor where Tommy can set down Wilbur's leg. He pulls the other one into his lap.

The space between songs is silent; above them, the clock ticks.

"Nobody needs me anymore," he says softly. His eyes are unfocused and locked onto some undefined point above Tommy's shoulder. "Not even Techno."

And that—that brings Tommy to a standstill more than anything else ever could. The tweezers pause in the insistent work, little metal pinchers locked around a particularly large shard of glass.

In all their time together, Wilbur had never mentioned Techno. He hardly even looked at him, even when they briefly worked that interrogation together. It's obvious, from Wilbur's twisted expression and Techno's sly looks—the helpless stares when he believed no one was watching—that *something* happened between them.

But Tommy, as skilled as he is in the art of deduction, can't even begin to piece together the shattered remains of their relationship.

"It's all gone to shit," he breathes. There's a tinge of that manic humor in the glint of his bared teeth. "All of it. Phil can't stand the sight of me. Techno—" he cuts off. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. His eyes are rimmed with red. "I hate him," he hisses, low and without any of the accompanying anger. "He always told me he would be there for me. That no matter what happened, no matter how I changed, he wasn't going to let me do it by myself."

Wilbur laughs, short and sharp and terribly bitter. "What a load of *bullshit* that was. Two years in, and where am I?" He raises his arms up. "Laying on the fucking floor in a pool of wine with a goddamn *concussion*."

"You don't have a concussion," Tommy says, quietly. It has only taken a simple probing of his fingers along the back of his before he was sure. The ache in Wilbur's head must be strong, though, if he confused a bump with something much worse. Or maybe that's just his typical dramatic flare showing itself.

"And where is he?" There's a heated flush spreading across Wilbur's face now, starting with his ears. His breath picks up, hands clenching and unclenching with excess energy. "Who the fuck does he think he is? You know, just before you arrived, he had—he had the *gall* to tell me—"

But whatever Techno had said to him didn't make it past his lips, which were curled away from his teeth in a soundless snarl. Wilbur looks away suddenly; his breath heaves his skinny chest, and his eyes blink excessively.

He is the very image of grief, of heartbroken rage, and it hurts to look at him for too long.

So Tommy averts his eyes, tilts his head down, and returns to his work. He doesn't know when he stopped—bloodied hands stilled in their job—but there's still so much glass to pick out.

"It doesn't matter what he said to me," Wilbur says after too long. His voice is deadly quiet, and Tommy can feel the tension that hums throughout his entire body. "It doesn't matter." His jaw is tense, and Tommy can see how the muscles strain against his skin.

His hands tighten into pale fists around whatever he can grab; in this case, he must've gotten ahold of one of the larger shards. Blood runs down his palm in thick streams, trailing down his wrist and catching on his sleeves. Tommy curses loudly when he notices and, with a tense hand wrapped around his wrist, he gently pries open Wilbur's fist.

There, covered in bloody fingerprints, lies a shard about the length of his palm. Its jagged edges sliced into his palm and his fingers, leaving angry red lines that welled with thick blood. Tommy grits his teeth against the wave of irritation.

But before Tommy can even reach for the shard, Wilbur is yanking his hand out of his iron grip. He jerks his arm forward, releasing the shard of glass so it hits the base of the counter in front of them. It shatters against it; some smaller shards lodge themselves in the wood while the others scatter along the ground.

"It doesn't matter because I fucking hate him! He's so pompous and—and arrogant! All he cares about is that fucking job, and upstaging me, and being the fucking best. I hate him," Wilbur screams. His bloodied fingers twist into his wine-stained hair, tugging and yanking until hairs get caught and tear.

"I hate him," he spits. His face is twisted up in rage, stained red with blood and wine and anger. His eyes are squeezed shut, but even that doesn't hide the tears that spill down his cheeks. "I wish I was dead, and that he was sick with grief and his own hatred for himself for the way he treated me. *I hate him*. I want him to hurt the way I have. I fucking *hate* him. I—I —" he cuts off with a choked sob.

And then, the dam breaks.

"I miss him," Wilbur wails. He releases the vice grip he has around his hair, strands tangled and knotted around his fingers as he pulls away. He digs the heel of his palms into his eyes, smearing blood across his cheeks. "I just—I just want him back. I want him to look at me like he used to, to smile and laugh and roll his eyes. I want to fucking fix this. But I don't know *how*."

And all Tommy can do, thirium trailing down his cheek from one of the tiny shards that ricocheted back at him, is stare. The tangy taste of his own blood explodes across his taste buds after a particularly hard bit to his lip, and his chest hasn't expanded with air since this conversation began. He is, completely and utterly, still.

And then Wilbur's eyes, bloodshot and glassy, are snapping open. They fixate on Tommy. For a moment, they seem locked in place. But then Wilbur lurches forward, and his bloodied hands find purchase in the front of Tommy's shirt. "Tell me what to do," he begs. "Tell me how to fix it." With his words, wild and desperate, Wilbur also shakes him. But it can't produce answers out of nothing.

And Tommy doesn't have any answers.

He doesn't have the skill set that others do; companion androids meant to soothe broken, lonely hearts, or nanny bots with their instinctive care, or even the artificial medical staff. Tommy doesn't know how to fix this situation. No advice wants to slip past his lips because he doesn't have any. He wasn't built to give advice.

All he can really do is use the skills at his disposal. And while he may not have been gifted with advice, he does have deduction skills. "I'll help you," he decides, if only to soothe the wide-eyed desperation, the tight grip with which Wilbur keeps him close. "But I don't know enough to help."

And so it's there, sprawled out on the linoleum floors stained with wine, with the grainy sound of a played-through record and a ticking clock above them, that Wilbur lets the words spill out. He tells him about their final argument days before Tommy's arrival, and all the ones leading up. He talks about their childhood full of love and gritty competition. He even talks about Phil a little, and the distance that only grew between them as the years went passed.

By the time Wilbur's done talking, his grip has loosened considerably. His words are slurred, although he can't tell if it's with the wine still in his system or with the exhaustion that lies underneath his eyes. There are bloody hand prints staining his white shirt, but that can be dealt with later. It's barely even a thought in Tommy's mind.

Wilbur finishes speaking, and Tommy looks at him. Really looks at him. He takes in the wide, watery eyes, and his red fists, and his frantic, quick breaths. He casts his mind back to every single interaction they've had, every single interaction he's observed, and any time he's ever watched Wilbur.

His mind spins as his system works overtime, drawing conclusions from his behavior, from the newly acquired information, and consolidating that mountain of information into useful words.

And when he speaks, it's with tentatively wet lips. "I think that—" his words are halting, chosen carefully out of a million and one options. "—you don't want people to see you at your most vulnerable." It's painfully obvious, but Tommy isn't feeling particularly eloquent today. It's a struggle to even get the words past his lips. "And so you push them away, because deep down, you're scared that they'll decide you aren't worth it."

It's silent, except for both their haggard breaths. Even then, they seem to quiet, as if to make space for his damning words. Tommy doesn't dare look at Wilbur.

"But what you really want... is for someone to look at you and stay. You want someone to look at you and decide that you're worth it. That you're worth caring about."

Wilbur's bottom lip trembles, ever so slightly. "What a selfish desire," he breathes out with a watery laugh.

And when Tommy looks at him—truly looks at him—it's with an intensity he didn't know he had. "Do you want to know what I think?" he asks. "Really?"

"I'm not sure if I do."

The silence stretches between them. "I think there's fault on both sides. Maybe your brother shouldn't have given up on you, but it's unfair to expect him to put in effort when even you didn't. You can't expect him alone to be your—" he falters, mind casting back to the fateful night after Stella's case. He thinks of Wilbur's expression then, haunted and tired, and of his words. "—your will to live."

He pauses. "I think you lash out because you're hurt, and because you want others to be as miserable as you." Tears run down his blood-stained cheeks, and for a second, Tommy is sure he's gone too far. But he can't pull it back now. "But more than *anything*... I think you're worth caring for."

It's like the air rushes out of his lungs in one breath.

Wilbur, despite what must be his better judgement, snaps his eyes to Tommy. They stare, for one long, impenetrable moment.

And then, fat tears rolling down his cheeks, Wilbur breaks the silence with hiccupping, quiet sobs. Tommy is certain that any second, he'll receive a notification alerting him to their decreased relationship status.

But then Wilbur lurches forward on unsteady knees. His gangly arms wrap in a vice around Tommy's chest, and his wet face finds a home between Tommy's shoulder and neck. He lets himself go limp, and it's that little display—of trust, he supposes—that hurts the most.

Tommy stills completely. And, after a tense, quiet moment, he awkwardly wraps his arms around Wilbur's back and allows Wilbur to continue sobbing into him.

Chapter End Notes

This is a lot shorter of a chapter than you've been used to lately, but I figure its got a lot of emotion in it. The next one will probably be around the same length (maybe a bit longer) but I should get it out pretty soon. I love these two chapters so much. There's just like a subtle shift in their relationship, and they're so emotional :) I especially had a lot of fun writing this one!

Also, I'm looking for a beta reader, if anyone is interested! Mostly, I just need someone with good close reading skills to be able to read through my chapters to make sure its 1) coherent and 2) not riddled with fucked grammar since I don't have time to and have noticed that there are a lot of errors. Pros of the job are that you would get to read the chapter a little early? I guess? Like a day or two early.

My discord is Nymphii #5063, so just message me there if you're interested! I'm looking for someone who has a reasonable amount of free time!

through the door

Chapter Summary

Wilbur hides from the (kind of positive) consequences of his actions, and Tommy is stuck trying to coax him out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Fifteen: Through the Door

October 13th, 2038

12:31 PM

The door is smooth under his knuckles as Tommy lightly raps them against it. The knock doesn't quite echo in the oppressive silence of the empty house, but it doesn't just fade into obscurity the second he stops. He pauses and lets the noise be swallowed by the walls. Nothing greets him; there is no other noise save for the faint ticking of an achingly familiar clock.

"Wilbur?"

There is no answer. Inside the room, through the inches of ancient wood that separate them, Tommy can hear the faint creak of a bed as Wilbur, presumably, continues to ignore him. He can imagine him; sealed away in the dim, dusty room, his body obscured beneath the covers and his face hidden by the pillow pressed over his head.

He has no way of knowing if this vivid image is true, but Tommy likes to think he has a pretty good grasp on Wilbur's personality. And, if last night did nothing else, it added to the ever-growing file of information he keeps carefully tucked away.

Tommy knows Wilbur, and he knows, more than anything else, that Wilbur has never been very good at confronting the consequences of his actions.

It seems a rather harsh picture to paint, though. Because, despite the glass strewn about the kitchen floor, the wine seeping into the thin cracks in the linoleum, and the thin scars that will mar his hands for a while, there aren't any *real* consequences.

Tommy doesn't think any less of him for it. It's quite the opposite, actually; last night had given him an insight he never dared to hope he would achieve. And even if he does think less of him for it, it doesn't matter. He's an android, after all. His opinion of Wilbur doesn't matter in the long run.

"It's getting pretty late," he says after a brief pause. "We should head into work soon."

More silence. It's beginning to grow on his nerves, and that persistent itch beneath his skin is back. His nails scrape along his forearm, but it's in the background to the heat rushing through his head. Pressing his lips together into a thin line, he snaps, "You can't fucking hide forever, okay? You have to leave your room eventually."

"Fuck off!"

It's pathetic, Tommy can only note distantly, that those are the first words Wilbur has spoken since he dissolved into a shuddering, sobbing mess. It's even more pathetic that Tommy feels better after hearing them. It's confirmation, at least, that Wilbur still is alive and conscious.

"You're not helpful," he says, because he can. He doesn't care that it's entirely unnecessary, and he certainly doesn't care that Wilbur knows this as well. Hell, he probably even thrives off it, that sick son of a bitch.

Wilbur's voice—low and gravelly and entirely too rough, scraping his probably sore throat raw—grumbles his dissent.

Tommy had left him a glass of water and a painkiller last night—after he spent twenty minutes corralling a drunk, clingy, and half-asleep Wilbur into his bed—but he isn't optimistic about the chances of him drinking it. Wilbur can be ruthlessly stubborn when he wants to, and he always wants to.

Tommy can already tell—by tone of voice alone and the fact that he's hiding behind his bedroom door—Wilbur isn't taking well to the drunken memories of him sobbing into Tommy's chest.

Still, he can't help but wait one more, naïve moment. He knows there's no chance that Wilbur will come stumbling out, hair either flattened to his head or sticking out in a gravity-defying way, with apologies on his lips. In fact, it's very unlikely that he'll do anything at all, other than hide away in his bed until several hours later when he'll come out, but avoid the situation with a flush that always starts at his ears.

Tommy knows him well, but he still gives him the benefit of the doubt. So he waits, listening to the absence of sound and trying to tune out the rhythmic ticking until his eyes slide out of focus. But when it becomes abundantly clear—and he can no longer hide behind his own ignorance or optimism or *foolishness*—Tommy steps away from the door with a sigh.

Even then, he loiters only a few feet away—because he simply can't help himself, and he wants to be near on the off chance that Wilbur calls out for him. When his own inaction begins to frustrate him, though, he migrates more towards the kitchen with unsure steps.

All the evidence of the fever dream that was last night has long since been stripped away. Tommy spent the early hours of the morning—when the newly risen sun was just barely peeking through the curtains—on his knees, scrubbing at the stuck-on wine. In the end, it took a few hours, and the combination of more than a dozen disinfectant wipes and his own short nails before the floor even began to show.

Tommy swivels his wrist as he walks, eyes scanning the smooth, unblemished fingers. It hadn't been that way before when red and blue stained his skin and freshly healed cuts still showed their delicate white lines. If he squints, he can still see the purple-red stain beneath his nails. He shivers and drops his hand.

All of his shallow cuts may have healed, but the same can't be said for Wilbur. That is, unequivocally, the worst part about dealing with the aftermath of his breakdown. The bleeding cuts, sluggish but thick and generous with their drops, staining both their shirts. It hadn't been pleasant, attempting to disinfect the wounds while Wilbur, eyelashes thick with sticky tears, hiccupped and made grabby hands at him like an overindulgent toddler.

And now, despite the stirrings of frail life in the cave Wilbur liked to call his bedroom, the man still refuses to show his face. Already, that last attempt was only one out of many, similarly pathetic ones. He's lost count over how many around his fifth attempt, where he tried to coax Wilbur out by threatening to cook for him. To both his shock and dismay, it didn't work.

With each unsuccessful attempt, Tommy's resolve wavers a little more.

He passes by the kitchen, only stopping briefly to swipe Wilbur's forgotten phone from its designated place on the counter. He gently tugs the cracked charger from it. As Tommy continues on his path to the living room, he easily unlocks it—0000, *really*, Wilbur?—and scrolls through the contacts until he finds the one simply labeled 'Phil'. Before he can assess the sensation that settles, tight in his chest—Phil, not dad—he starts the call.

The phone rings, and he presses it against his ear. It's unnecessary, holding the phone up to his ear. Hell, the entire phone is unnecessary to him, who has an entire computer for a brain. But it feels human. Tommy doesn't let his wandering thoughts focus on that too much.

He stills in front of the window, framed by a closed curtain, and gently nudges the small gap until he can see better.

It's a beautiful day. The sky is clear, save for a few fluffy clouds that float, aimlessly, in the gentle breeze. The sun beats down, and, although Tommy can't see it directly, he watches its rays cast shadows on the ground. The large maple tree—*Acer macrophyllum*—in the front yard, with its arching branches full of massive, green leaves, is already turning with the season. The edges of its leaves are ringed with gold, and Tommy smiles.

It's easy, when confronted with such a beautiful sight, to forget the phone held to his ear. He only remembers it when the ringing stops, suddenly.

There's a moment of silence.

And then, "Wilbur?"

Tommy will never know how Phil manages to fit so much emotion into so little speech. He sounds tired—his words weighed down with the ever present exhaustion that clings to him like a second shadow. He sounds exasperated, as well, maybe because of their absence, or maybe it's something else. Although Tommy has the feeling it's the latter; it's been too many years of Wilbur's behavior for this to be surprising anymore.

But under it all—underneath the weariness and resignation—there's hope.

Something bitter and apologetic churns in Tommy's gut. "Uh, nope. Not Wilbur," he says after an awkward pause. "It's Tommy." It seems, as the silence once again consumes them, that he's making a lot of unnecessary decisions. But he's feeling off-kilter, and too raw, from last night. His mind and thoughts are scrambled. "Sorry to bother you, Captain, but Wilbur and I are unable to make it into work today."

"Is something wrong?"

His entire demeanor has shifted; suddenly, he sounds much more alert, and the sound of a chair creaking as it moves filters through the receiver. Tommy can almost picture Phil at his desk—although he's only ever seen it once, during their first meeting—sitting forward so suddenly that the chair can only make its protest known.

Tommy pauses, lip bitten and raw as he contemplates.

It's a difficult question, and Tommy struggles to answer it despite the unholy storm of thoughts swirling in his head. Technically, so many things are wrong. The strongest examples are Wilbur's hands and feet, littered with cuts, and his own refusal to leave his room, even to his own detriment.

But there's no way that Phil could help with any of that. Informing him would only make him worry needlessly, at best.

So, with lips pressed into a grim line, he makes his decision. "No. Nothing's wrong," he says with false breeziness. "Wilbur is just feeling a little under the weather, and I thought... Well, you know, he's been doing pretty good lately. At showing up to work. Waking up at a decent hour." Tommy hopes his authenticity makes it through the receiver; Wilbur has been doing much better lately, and Tommy can't help but be a little bit proud of him. "I thought I'd give him a break."

There's a long pause. The hum of something in the background, on Phil's end, attempts to fill the silence.

"Feeling under the weather...*huh?*"

It's almost impressive, Tommy thinks, how easily Phil can impart his meaning through tone alone. It's clear, from the unimpressed delivery and the odd, halting emphasis he places on his words, that Phil knows exactly what happened last night.

Well, not *exactly*. There's no way he knows about Wilbur's drunken confessions or his bloody, clingy hands that tightened into fists around Tommy's shirt, refusing to let go. The way his wet face, burning with alcohol and intensity, found solace only in Tommy's neck. Nobody in their right mind would ever suspect that.

That strange—and yet frustratingly, aching familiar—heat burns his face. He feels the odd and sudden need to defend Wilbur, especially against Phil's routine disappointment.

Because that isn't the case at all. If it were just a simple hangover, Tommy would say a decisive *'fuck it'* and risk Wilbur's wrath to drag him into work. This investigation is important, and Wilbur knows how to deal with hangovers. He's had years of experience dragging himself out of bed with an energetic drum beat pounding in his skull.

But it's not just a hangover. It's the flayed feet and the deep lines dug into the rough skin of his palms because of his own anger. It's the blank desperation behind his bleary, sunken eyes as he clung to Tommy, as he begged for answers to a question that most professionals struggled to solve. It's the clear, blatant craving for connection, for intimacy with someone besides his reflection and his own depressing thoughts.

"Listen," he says, tone short and clipped. "Last night was rough." More words press against the tight seal of his lips—and, oh, how they *press*, begging to be let out, for Phil to know all the *gritty* details—but, quite frankly, Tommy doesn't think he deserves them. Nor does he think Wilbur would be pleased to find out tales of his breakdown escaped the four shabby walls of this house.

"Was it?"

And there's that tone again. Unsurprised, yes, but also condescending. Patronizing. As if Tommy couldn't tell what was another drunken night and a genuine, psychological breakdown that would give any therapist a field day. Hell, that's being generous: a field *week*.

It's the blatant dismissal of Wilbur's problems—as if the fact that he routinely drinks himself into oblivion and an increasingly early grave is acceptable; as if it's just another *quirky* habit or lovable flaw, instead of a deeply troubling, unhealthy coping mechanism—that has that heat returning. His fingers clench around Wilbur's phone so tight his knuckles protest, but even then, in the midst of a mind-numbing fog, he's careful not to crush it.

"It was," Tommy says. He doesn't care that his voice is cold in its harshness and laced with disrespect. He doesn't even hear it through the pounding of his thirium pump. "And now, Wilbur, who has *more than* earned himself a break lately, is going to rest. Thank you so much, *Captain*."

And, without waiting to hear any of Phil's perfunctory goodbyes, Tommy pulls the phone away from his ear and hangs up.

The stillness and the silence of the house are overbearing, but Tommy doesn't feel comfortable playing music. Wilbur certainly isn't in the mood—both from the headache that

must be pounding at his temples and from the uncharacteristic show of vulnerability. It wouldn't do good to upset him further, but restlessness crawls under his skin.

It feels, vaguely, like those early days he spent in the house all alone. The silence is painfully familiar, and so, unfortunately, is the incessant need to be useful. He doesn't think he can stand to lay back on the couch now, with only the thrum of his system for company.

Instead, he reaches into the far depths of his database, poking and prodding at various files as he goes. There are so many things in here, so much important information that he's tucked away with the faint promise of 'later'. And yet, there's been little time for rumination, for analysis.

It seems now is that time, though, and his system quiets when Tommy resigns to his own stillness. Rustling through the carefully organized mess that is his thoughts, he pulls out four important files, each labeled, simply and neatly, with four names: Jack, Niki, Stella, Ranboo.

The four deviants that Tommy has officially encountered. He looks them over with a critical, metaphoric eye.

There *has* to be some common link uniting them. Androids rarely spontaneously malfunction, and never to this extreme degree or frequency. No, there has to be something he's not seeing, a missing causation or correlation of some kind. There has to be some reason that deviancy arises; a malfunction in their code, a virus that spreads through digital contact, *something*.

It's *supposed* to be his job to figure it out.

Squeezing his eyes shut against the wave of frustration and shoving the other, useless sensations to the side, he starts simple. Keeping their files side by side in his vision, obscuring the beautiful sight of an early fall day, he first considers their model types. In a separate tab, he pulls up a new document to record all his thoughts.

In yet another tab—he has to overlap them, now, so that he can fit them all in his vision—he pulls up mechanical diagrams of each model type, committing each one to memory. As he does, he takes note of all their functions. He shifts through their standard code, eyes roving over the words, symbols, and numbers that come more naturally than speaking.

All the while, he ponders over the abilities—either programmed or not—that their mechanical design affords them. Tommy marks all these ideas, no matter how ridiculous or improbable they are, in expansive and blocky paragraphs on the document.

He doesn't, frustratingly, find a common factor between their model types. While two of them were designed to care for children, Niki was a common domestic android, and Stella was built for romantic companionship. Clearly, there weren't many similarities in their functions and abilities. Tommy would be a bit concerned if there were, considering one was designed to primarily be around children and the other was... decidedly not.

With a forced breath through clenched teeth, Tommy's nimble fingers rub at the junction between his brows.

So, there's no common denominator between their model types and functions. *That's fine*, he convinces himself despite the agitation ebbing at his brain. Tommy was built for patience. He was built for long-night stakeouts, for stillness and silence and endless observation.

And, *of course*, an investigation of this magnitude, of this *importance*, isn't going to be solved as easily as that.

The next thing he considers is model age.

Tommy knows, roughly, three of their ages, based off conversations with Niki, Stella's... partner—and oh how he struggles to use that word to describe James, even mentally—and Cyrus. He knows that both Niki and Ranboo are older models and that both of them had been bought second hand. He knows Stella was new and shiny and right off the conveyor belt.

The only unknown is Jack's age, other than a rough estimate based only on the date that his model came out. He knows that his owners—that one stings as well, although not nearly as much as the other one—wanted to buy a newer model. This, at least, suggested some age, although Tommy is well aware of the greed and materialism of people in this day and age.

Three of them suggested an older age, a worn model with at least some wear and tear. It would make sense, logically speaking, that the longer an android existed, the more chances for a malfunction in their code. It was almost like how the longer humans lived, the easier it was for their DNA to be copied incorrectly, for proteins to be misfolded.

Because that's all deviancy was. The android version of cancer, basically.

Despite this, it doesn't account for Stella, who, by her own account, was practically an infant. Less than one month old. A statistical outlier, perhaps?

His system whirs faintly. It matches and harmonizes with the breeze that beats leafy twigs against the front of the house. His mind spins as Tommy mentally picks apart the evidence and stitches new theories together in the same breath.

Although it pains him to admit, there simply isn't enough evidence to make any sort of conclusions just yet. In the document—already a page and a half long, with sprawling profiles for each deviant—he marks 'android age' as something to continue to look into. He doesn't feel comfortable discounting it so early on.

If android age brought viable but ultimately inconclusive implications, it was possible that previous damage held some sort of significance.

Although Tommy doesn't have a profile for Joy, he does remember that James mentioned she had been damaged, although he didn't elaborate any further—not that Tommy regretted that lack of information; some things are better off not being known, and James already revealed far more than he was comfortable knowing.

And Ranboo, too, as Cyrus had so cagily admitted. The odd and lanky android had undergone something so physically traumatic—a car accident, although after Michael's admittedly well-

done drawings he doesn't believe that for a single second—that he needed professional repairs.

And then a thought enters his brain, so abhorrent and entirely debilitating, taking away any ability he has to logic his way out of this puzzling conundrum, that he immediately rejects it. But, as he works his lip between stubborn teeth, Tommy keeps returning to it.

What if there is no unifying factor? What if it's a case-by-case situation? What if it's dependent on each different model with a multitude of factors affecting deviancy? Like how there are risk factors for human conditions, and those certain factors can increase the risk for acquiring a certain type of condition. What if there are risk factors for deviancy that make it more likely? All these little things that he has been considering on their own—model type, age, function—didn't matter separately, but together...

If that theory is true—and it's hardly a theory, just a stubborn thought that makes Tommy queasy with its complexity—then the situation becomes so much more difficult. His LED burns yellow at his temple, and so, rather than debate the validity of such a distressing thought, he retreats back into safe simplicity.

What was he thinking about before? Oh, right. Past injury.

As far as he's aware, Jack hadn't undergone any previous injuries. Clementine's parents didn't seem the type to pay any attention to their android, other than another collection like the priceless knickknacks that had adorned their walls, let alone to injure him. He can't discount any accidents, though; but Tommy finds nothing of interest as he goes down a rabbit hole, gently prodding at repair shop records for any mention of him.

Stella hadn't, although Niki clearly did, considering the abuse she suffered through on the regular and her own haunting tales.

And again, his pathetically small sample size is split. Which tells Tommy fuck all.

With another frustrated sigh, he minimizes the tabs crowding his vision. It feels like a breath of fresh air when he can finally see again, and Tommy immediately focuses on the gentle sway of Wilbur's overgrown lawn in the breeze. He watches the sun lazily inch its way across a now clear sky and indulges in the peace and shelter that nature affords him.

When he feels his frustrations ebb away under the calming tidal waves that cascade through the ocean of grass, he pulls his tabs back up. There are still more, albeit small, factors to consider. Useless tidbits of information that his system kept flagging, lest they have some kind of importance and he overlooked them.

Like RA9, although somehow, that doesn't feel useless. It feels important, especially with the halting, reverent way Niki spoke of it. And yet, no android except for her had mentioned it. This could be due to situation alone; the fact of the matter is that he didn't get to have an extensive, sit down interrogation with anyone except her.

The closest to that would be Stella, but even then, it was fueled with desperation, fear, and stilted with lingering aggression. He carefully sets RA9 to be considered, again, later.

A memory reset? At least two out of his main four— Niki and Ranboo—had gone through a memory reset. And it was at least two times for Ranboo, since he must have had an owner before Cyrus and then lost his memories in the supposed car accident that damaged him so badly.

With a jolt that has his hands—which were still raised to push the stubborn curtain out of the way—knocking into the glass, he realizes the connection. Or, at least, a connection.

All of the deviants claimed to have undergone some sort of 'emotional shock'.

For Jack, it was the realization that he was replaceable to the family he mistakenly believed had cared about him. For Niki, it was the stress of living in a house under an unpredictable and abusive man, and the terrifying approach of her own destruction.

For Stella, it had been the combination of being a replacement for someone else and having an unwanted romantic relationship forced on her. For Ranboo, it was the cognitive dissonance, the inner turmoil of conflicting beliefs, of watching his owner abuse his charge.

But that still does make sense. Androids aren't meant to experience emotions, so something as foreign as an 'emotional shock' shouldn't affect them.

And yet, it seems to be the sole uniting factor.

By the time Tommy has meticulously organized his findings into a concise document labeled with several different subsections detailing every deviant encounter, time has passed. The sun dangles directly overhead, casting short shadows. He casts a look over his shoulder, only to find Wilbur's door as firmly shut as before. He sighs.

Irritation doesn't itch his skin like before, so he feels content settling down on the couch. He's accomplished something, as the long, complex document still in the corner of his vision can attest to, and that's more than enough to soothe his restlessness.

His body sinks into the familiar, smooshed cushions of the couch. Tommy hadn't been afforded the luxury of rest—no matter how unnecessary—that morning. Bigger things, mainly a clingy, bleeding Wilbur and a kitchen splattered with all manner of fluids as well as speckled with glass shards, had called for him.

But now, in the perpetual silence, he isn't needed. There's no convincing Wilbur when he gets like this, and, despite the overwhelming heat that simmers in the back of his mind, it isn't worth trying. Tommy knows he isn't going to get a response.

Instead, he squirms until he's firmly situated in the couch's ancient embrace. Tommy reaches up carelessly, dragging the neatly folded blanket off the top and onto his curled up body. And then, he entertains thoughts of stasis mode.

Stasis mode is— It's like—

Tommy could live a thousand lifetimes and still never have the words to describe it. It isn't how human sleep must be, or what he imagines it's like. It isn't filled with dreams or

memories or images or—or suggestions. It's like a black hole—an absence of stimuli, of consciousness.

It's like a mental fog. It blurs his thoughts and numbs his perception of the world outside his plastic skin. He isn't conscious—not even a little bit, in that weird way that machines *can* be—and yet, he can feel time passing around him.

It's neither restful nor tiring, but Tommy lets himself fall into it, anyway. It's not like he has anything better to do.

When Tommy surfaces from the murky depths, more time has passed. He can tell, not just because of the foggy change in the air—undefinable and indescribable, but still *there*—but because of the strip of sunlight that falls over his face.

Tommy rubs at his eyes and clumsily heaves himself from the couch's insistent embrace. His body feels heavy, and his feet seem to hate him, tripping over nothing and dragging across the floor. He stumbles as he walks, catching himself every so often on the nearest surface while stifling yawns.

The house—surprise, surprise—remains unchanged.

Tommy shuffles through the house until he comes to a stop a few feet in front of Wilbur's door. Closed. Sealed. It will be his tomb; but, as Tommy thinks of the clothes obscuring the floor, it isn't a very good one. "Wilbur?"

There is only a faint, annoyed grunt from within. It's surprisingly comforting. At least Wilbur isn't already dead, his body hidden by a thick comforter and rotting in a bed of his own making.

"I called us off, so don't worry about work. I'm not sure how many sick days you have left—" if he had to guess, he would probably say 'none'. "—but I convinced Phil that it was necessary. So don't worry about work." Even as the words leave his lips, he knows how ridiculous they are. As if Wilbur was, at all, worried about work. Tommy waits until the silence settles back in before he says, softly, "You should drink some water, Wilbur."

There is no response. Not even a half-hearted 'fuck you'.

Because, apparently, a 'fuck you'—which is honestly hated and perceived as a grand offense, in some circles—is too good for him.

The heat comes in waves. It starts first in his ears, like how he sees a flush begin on Wilbur's, and from there, it spreads like wildfire. It diffuses through his veins, spreading out until his entire body is shaking with tension. His muscles are clenched; his jaw is hinged so tightly he worries for the state of it.

And, as his chest heaves with artificial breath, it feels right. It feels like everything—every little perceived slight, every moment of snubbing and ignoring and aggression on Wilbur's part—has been leading up to this moment: Tommy, standing in a silent hall, bathed in soon dying sunlight and glaring at Wilbur's sealed door.

"Do you know how frustrating this all is?" His words echo throughout the house. They're loud, and damning, and they slip from his lips far too easily. It's almost addictive, this feeling of giving in. Allowing himself, the prettiest picture of patience and self-control and *logic*, to fall victim to some of his baser instincts.

"Do you even *recognize* the fucking awful ways you've been treating me? It's—" Tommy cuts himself before anything irreversible can spill out. His system screams warnings at him, and his tentatively neutral relationship status with Wilbur pops up in the corner of his vision. He still has a mission, and that includes getting Wilbur to like him.

But, as Tommy presses his blunt nails into his palms, Wilbur didn't have to be civil. He didn't have to hold himself back to keep poison from dripping down his chin. Why does Wilbur get to be prickly and antagonistic and cruel while Tommy has to be peppy and accepting? In what world is that *fair*?

Fuck this. And fuck him.

"All I've ever tried to do is *help you*, Wilbur." His mouth twists into a scowl, and he leans in towards the door. His hand props him up against the battered door frame, thirium he didn't even realize was there, smearing against the wood. "I have done nothing but be a good little android," he spits out. "I made your house habitable. It was like a fucking hazard zone in here before, Wilbur, and I made it sparkle. Do you know how much time that took?"

Silence is his only answer. The lack of response only spurs him on, fans the flame of his preverbal fire.

"I could've used that time to be doing other things, but no. I cleaned your fucking house because I thought—" his voice cracks. It's such a foreign sound that he startles, a little. "—that you would be *grateful*. No, not even that! I thought that maybe it would make you *like* me, even the slightest bit." Tommy throws his hands up in the air. "Hell, I would've settled for a slightly less aggressive stare than usual. Maybe a nod of reluctant approval. But did I get *anything*?"

It's like some dam has broken. Tommy couldn't stop the water rushing if he wanted to; his attempts, to hold this rush of word vomit and heat back, were like trying to fix a massive crack with a band-aid.

His body is coiled so tightly that it trembles. His hands ache to do something; he envisions punching the wall to relieve himself of this excess energy and only just manages to stop himself. The side of his hand collides, albeit gently, with the plaster next to the door.

It barely even makes a sound.

"And don't even get me started on all the ignoring. Or—or the fucking—the *incident*." Tommy still can't bring himself to say it, to even think of it, and that burns. "I mean, seriously, what the fuck?" His voice is as indignant as his face must be. His nails gently drag against the wall, and oh, how he wants to tear down the thin layers that separate him.

Wilbur's silence—so usually loud in its meaning—is useless to him. He can't pull any interpretation from it; Tommy needs to see Wilbur's pinched expression, to watch how his body shifts with his reactions.

His hand forms a claw, and his fingernails dig into the paint. More blue blood is left in his wake.

"Dogs have been treated better than me," Tommy hisses, hands digging into his hair, nails pressing down on his scalp. "*Dogs*. That's—that's—" Totally acceptable.

Or, it should be.

He's an android. He isn't alive. He doesn't contain nerve endings or cells or chemosignals. It's fine if he's treated worse than a dog because a dog is actually alive. And he isn't.

He doesn't know when he stopped being okay with that.

Maybe it was last night, although he has no idea why that would be the thing that breaks him. But then he revisits that night in his mind.

Tommy thinks of Wilbur's drunken confession. He thinks of the way he clung, desperately, to anything within reach, and whispered such damning words. He thinks of his words; his ready admittance to his own ignorance and helplessness. The words remain where they have since he first spoke them; stuck, like a knife, in Tommy's heart and repeating in an endless loop in his brain.

His bottom lip trembles. "I don't know what I'm doing, either," he says, softly. "Is that what you want to hear me say?" Tommy leans forward further until his forehead rests against the door. If he opens his eyes—which are squeezed shut so tightly—he's sure he'll be able to see the way the red flickering light glints off the walls. He certainly can feel the uncomfortable burning.

"You want some big show of—of vulnerability to match yours? Well, I don't! I don't fucking know what I'm doing!" he laughs. It's too mechanical and fake and dripping with his own bitterness. "Do you know how fucked up that is? I'm an android. It's in my programming to be efficient. To know things." For whatever reason, the word android tastes sour on his lips. "But I feel so fucking lost. I don't—I don't know what to do. I don't know how to *fix* any of this."

It feels like a direct parallel to Wilbur's speech; but where Wilbur was choked sobs and frantic hands, Tommy is still and quiet. He can't be sure his words even make it through the thick door.

"I've felt an android die. I unintentionally helped another one be destroyed, even when he should've been okay. I—" his voice catches, and Tommy licks his lips. "I *imprisoned* Niki. But despite all the information at my fingertips, in my fucking brain, I still can't figure out the connection."

"And—and there's so much riding on me doing this job correctly. I'm supposed to be perfect and good at it, but I'm not." His breath leaves him in tiny, shivering pants. It ghosts along the wood, slicking it with humidity and mist. "I'm not. It took me literal weeks to get anywhere *near* neutral ground with you... and even then, George—" he cuts himself off suddenly, eyes snapping open. He shouldn't talk about their conversation. It remains tucked away in the slowly increasing file of 'Things He Should Never Ever Think About'.

The silence swallows him whole. It's so easy to forget how powerful it is. Even when noise spills from a record player or slips from his spit-slick lips, it always returns.

"Every step forward with you is two steps back. You open up, and then you shut me out. I've only tried to be your friend, but it's becoming increasingly clear that you—"

This time, he cuts himself off for good. Tommy clamps down on that train of thought and refuses to resume it. Nothing good will come from that route, and he can only imagine the pain it will cause, based on Wilbur's confessions from last night.

"You're hurting yourself, Wilbur," he says instead of the million, poisonous sentences just lying in wait for him to slip up. "It doesn't matter that you're shutting me out, because you're hurting yourself in the process. Ignoring the *literal glass wounds* on your hands, it's not healthy to lock yourself away." Heat is tiring, he's finding out quickly. It's addictive and empowering, but it's so, so exhausting. He slumps against the door, letting his nose touch the wood.

"You need to stay in bed all day? Fine. I get that." Tommy pauses. "Well, no, not—not really. But I can understand it in a sort of abstract way. But at least drink something. It wouldn't kill you to eat a fucking apple and a protein bar. You don't even have to leave, just—"

His hand curls around the cool doorknob. It offers clarity, in an odd sort of way, and Tommy takes comfort in the way it quells his mind-numbing heat.

"Just let me in, Wilbur."

The quiet groans of an old house are all that answer him.

Tommy doesn't know what he was expecting, but there's a pressure in his head and behind his eyes. He keeps them squeezed shut. There isn't enough energy to move, and so he doesn't.

Helplessness claws at his throat. It creates a block that sweet, sweet air has trouble getting past. He tries to swallow the lump down, but it doesn't go anywhere.

Tommy doesn't have any more words left. He doesn't know how to fix this situation, and his own uselessness eats at him. He tries to think of calming things—dust dancing lazily in

sunbeams, music playing through a staticky player, green plants stretching towards the sky—but he isn't sure it helps.

But then, through the pounding of his thirium pump in his ears, he hears it. The soft sound of bare feet padding across wood floors and through piles of dirty clothes strewn about. He hears the creak of old planks under a person's weight, and, with a chest still of artificial breath and eyes wide without the need to blink, Tommy waits in complete stillness.

He feels more so than hears Wilbur sit down on the floor on the other side. The door rattles as he leans against it, and Tommy can feel the vibrations in his eyes. He can feel the ominous creak of rusted hinges. He can hear the unsteady breathing through the narrow cracks in the door.

The spell breaks, and Tommy pulls away from the door just long enough to sit down on the smooth floor. It's cool from the still buzzing air conditioner, and the ancient wood digs into his spine. He presses against the door as if he and Wilbur were sitting back to back, and he slips his fingertips in as far as the narrow crack will allow.

They don't find anything, other than dust and grime, but he keeps them there. Just in case.

And, when his mouth opens, words spill out.

Just like before, he is helpless to stop them. But unlike his spitting, furious rhetoric, he spins a different tale. One of an android and his adventures alone.

He starts, as he always must, with the gang of feral raccoons that patrol the streets.

Obviously, Wilbur knows of them, the little menaces that they are. Wilbur's trash is, apparently, next to none, and so often, before Tommy took his regular job as feeder and defender of little trash creatures, his garbage would adorn the lawn.

But Tommy still speaks of them, anyway. Because it's easy. Because Tommy knows them each by the different markings on their faces and has begun to name them. Every single time he sees them, he picks out a new creature to spend a few minutes stewing on. He sits with them, talks to them, reads their little trash aura, until he eventually decides on a unique and fitting name for them.

He talks about the stars that litter the sky. He speaks about cities and their pollution, and how pretty the stars must be out in the country. He admits how lucky he thinks he'd be if he ever got to see them in person.

And when the silence crowds in on him, when Tommy loses the words to continue about the stars, he moves on. He brings up Wilbur's disused TV, and the brief use it had being his next distraction.

"I needed something to distract me," Tommy says in a sort of halting way, in the middle of his dramatic regaling of his adventures. "Because I just needed to." It's a simple explanation. In all honesty, it doesn't really explain anything. But it feels fitting. Even if he knows nothing

else, he knows that it feels right. He just needed something to focus on, to ignore the dark silence.

He tells Wilbur all about the shows he watched. But, no matter what he says, it always comes back to *Up*. He gushes about the animation, about the character design, about the *music*, and the concept. But, most of all, he talks about the plot. The colorful balloons may have drawn him in, but it was the relationship between the old man and the kid that kept him there.

"Could you imagine if that was your house? I mean, you already act like a grumpy old man, so it wouldn't be too much of a stretch. Just, you know, physics." Tommy shrugs his shoulders, as if to dismiss the very idea. He doesn't know when it happened—and he's been trying to ignore it, to create a sense of normalcy—but Wilbur's fingers brush against the tips of his own in *something*.

Comradery, maybe. Or something as simply complex as understanding

"Wouldn't that be incredible? To see the world?" Tommy says with a faint smile tilting the corners of his lips. "You seem like the type of guy who has traveled a lot," he says after too long, vivid images of waterfalls and rainbows and natural wonders. "A real geography nerd, you are. I bet you could recommend some really cool places." Wilbur grunts in acknowledgment, but Tommy can't tell if it's in affirmation or not.

His other hand skates along the fabric stretched over his knees, which press against his scrawny chest. The pressure, barely there, hardly registers to the tough skin of his knee and to the tiny nano receptors there. Tommy's mind whirs as he searches for another topic. For anything to extend the one-sided conversation.

And, in what must be a grand finale, but what was really the start of his explorations, Tommy tells Wilbur about the music. There's too much to say, and so he fears he doesn't say nearly enough. His feelings for music are so big, they transcend words. He's ineloquent and stumbling, but Wilbur occasionally hums at all the right places, and just that little bit of encouragement is enough to keep him going.

He tells Wilbur about the hours he's spent imaging Wilbur's music. He tells him how he noticed the thick callouses, faded a little with age and disuse, on his fingers, and how he noticed the forgotten guitar in his room.

He doesn't know how much of his ramblings are coherent, but Tommy doesn't think Wilbur minds. It probably isn't about the words; it's about his presence, solid and there, through the door. It's about his voice and his words and noise filling a previously silent house. It's about life, he thinks, despite the fact that he's so devoid of it.

This time, when the silence falls back on them, it isn't stifling at all. It's almost companionable.

"Will you play for me, one day?" Tommy asks. He doesn't elaborate on how he knows, and Wilbur doesn't ask him to. Tommy knows Wilbur, but Wilbur also knows Tommy, just a little bit.

Tommy doesn't expect an answer. Save for that one 'fuck off' at the start, his expectations on Wilbur's verbal responses have been ridiculously low. He leans against the door and makes himself content with the heat radiating from Wilbur's fingertips.

But then they're gone. And Tommy listens to the faint, echoing sounds of a guitar being lifted and gently placed in a lap. He listens, with bated breath, as a hand strums down the strings. They're out of tune, and the guitar is clearly old, but Tommy's never heard a more beautiful sound.

It's not what he needs it to be. It's not enough to make up for the shitty treatment, or to patch the gap that stands between them like a gaping maw of raw emotions.

But it's a start.

And, as Wilbur's gentle strumming replaces the everlasting, pervasive silence and that goddamn clock, happily ticking away, and Tommy's own vortex of thoughts pounding a beat in his skull, it feels like an apology.

Chapter End Notes

This is the start of Tommy's 'Say Anything Bad About Wilbur and I Will Fight You' arc :D And, just like a younger brother mimicking his older brother, Tommy has an anger fueled monologue followed by an emotional breakdown!

Wilbur, who knows fuck all about androids, watching Tommy have an emotional breakdown that rivals his and then talk about silly shit for like an hour: "So... this is normal, right?"

Thank you to all of the people you messaged me on discord offering to be my beta! Honestly, there were so much more of you than I ever expected! I'm so thankful for all the offers, and I'm sorry to those whits just o I had to turn down :(

two steps back

Chapter Summary

The boys return to work and recover from emotional exhaustion. Tommy has to deal with his system's justifications. After all, one step forward means...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Sixteen: Two Steps Back

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October 14th, 2038

10:17 AM

The next morning, when Tommy peels himself out of the too-soft cushions that have molded to his body, the first thing he registers is the oddness. His body doesn't feel like his. The sensations that usually plague him in this now familiar house—the scratchiness of the couch against his skin, the breeze from the vent awkwardly positioned over him, and his overbearing consciousness in his head—feel distant.

He doesn't feel like he's in this body, but as if his consciousness floats somewhere above his left shoulder. Freely hanging in the air, but attached to this mechanical body through some sort of... soul magnetism.

Androids don't have souls.

Tommy frowns. The thought doesn't feel like his, distant and alien. But the more he ponders it, the more right it feels. Of course androids don't have souls. They're machines, driven by wires and electricity and a mix of odd chemicals that makes up thirium. He doesn't know why he even compared his sort of awareness to a soul, other than to make some metaphorical point to... an audience of only himself.

Right.

The odd feeling only continues throughout their morning routine. Wilbur eventually crawls out of his cave, greasy and starved and like some kind of creature. His ears are tinged with the lingering embarrassment of the past two days, but his eyes are usually serious. He isn't hiding from it, not anymore, and the steely glint in them seems to convey that. He has been

put through the wringer, strung out emotionally, and stuck in his bed for an entire day, but he refuses to let that restrict him.

And Tommy feels pride at the way he nods at the android before ducking into the bathroom to wash away the emotions.

Androids don't feel things.

Right. So he didn't feel pride, exactly, because he can't feel things. That was just another odd way to describe the sensation of accomplishing one of his goals. His relationship with Wilbur—or lack thereof, for a while—had always been a source of...

His mind reels, thoughts faltering as he attempts to find a word to fill in the blank. It's only then that he realizes how often he had begun to use feeling words, despite himself.

Tommy frowns, hands stalling in the process of pulling a few snack-like things to prepare an impromptu breakfast for Wilbur.

Right, that's weird. It's probably just a side effect of being around humans too much, of molding himself into the perfect detective to gain Wilbur's favor. He shakes his head in an attempt to clear it, but that odd, out of body feeling sticks with him.

That's fine. He'll get better at ignoring it.

Wilbur comes out of the shower a new man. His skin is still red, but it's from the heat of the water rather than any embarrassment. He smiles, faintly, when he sees Tommy struggling to maximize the amount of apple he can cut away from the core.

And just like that, their dance begins. Wilbur sets himself the task of brewing up a fine cup of coffee, and Tommy continues to gather up his small breakfast and a brief snack before lunch. They maneuver around each other and, before too long, Tommy meanders into the living room to put a random record on. Music fills the home as it was always meant to.

After a few songs, when Wilbur has poured his coffee into a stained to-go cup, and Tommy has bagged the assortment of items into two separate bags—unnecessarily labeled 'breakfast' and 'lunch snack'—they turn off all the lights and pull out the driveway.

Walking back into the office after a day away shouldn't feel as weird as it does, but Tommy can't shake the feeling of wrongness. Something is deeply, invasively wrong, but he can't put his finger on it. The lights as they walk in are too bright, flickering in that obnoxious way that fluorescent lights tend to do.

Wilbur nods at the android receptionist as they pass—which is, holy shit, Wilbur's never done that before—but Tommy doesn't even have time to contemplate his odd behavior before they're plunged into the mess of movement and noise that is the bullpen.

It's unusually busy, but Tommy can't, for the life of him—

Androids aren't alive.

Yeah, he fucking knows.

The oddity, the unfamiliarity of the thought fades within seconds, and then all he's left with is confusion. It's odd that he would think such a thing, because he *knows*. He just tends to be dramatic, behavior probably adapted from Wilbur, so it's a completely unnecessary reminder.

As he was thinking—before he was so *rudely* interrupted by... himself, he supposes—Tommy can't figure out why it's so busy.

Officers cross the floor, stacks of paper and ink-leaking pens clutched in their hands. They talk amongst themselves, and all the conversations add up. They combine into one low, monotonous buzz that fills the room. Even Techno, who Tommy only ever sees on his own, is hunched over someone's desk. His face is scrunched in intense concentration, mouth moving lightning quick, and his fingers are reaching for the pencil tucked behind his ear.

"Huh," Wilbur says, as they come to a standstill in the entrance of the office. Their arms brush together. Tommy barely feels it through the wrongness. Despite their stillness, everyone else continues in their flurry of movements. Several officers slip past them; some squeeze into the office with muttered apologies and others almost knock the duo away as they leave with grim faces. "I guess there must be some kind of break in the red ice investigation."

Tommy stares at him, at the subtle tension he carries in his jaw, then traces his eye line to look at Techno once again. Right. Tommy knows so much more about their relationship, now. He knows about their golden years and the months of fighting. He knows about their final fight, and all the harsh words exchanged. Including a dig from Wilbur on Techno's ability to do his job.

When he looks back at Wilbur, their eyes meet. Wilbur shrugs, helplessly, and then disappears into the flurry of activity. Tommy stares at the closed door to Phil's office. Then, he follows after Wilbur.

It takes a minute to track him through the stream of officers, but when he finally finds him, he's been pulled to a halt by a sneering Schlatt. Because of course he is. Wilbur seems to have terrible luck; he's still not fully recovered from the whole ordeal—his hands shook around the steering wheel—and, from the pained expression on his face, he isn't in any mood to deal with Schlatt.

When Tommy waltzes up—with steps that make too little sound against the harsh floor, or maybe his hearing is just obscured through whatever fog has captured him—Schlatt barely looks away from Wilbur, other than a brief, dismissive glance. "Awww, your little pet still following you?" he taunts, lips parted to reveal sharp canines.

And maybe it's the sting of the night before, the raw emotions still exposed, and the way Tommy threw his behavior back in his face but Wilbur tenses at the word. They're like night and day; Wilbur with muscles so taut he begins to shake, and Schlatt, half-sitting on the edge of his desk with languid, casual body language. "Shut the fuck up, Schlatt," Wilbur hisses with venom. Tommy doesn't know whether to be pleased—

Androids don't feel things.

Right. He, obviously, can't be pleased that Wilbur is coming to his defense, but it clearly demonstrates an increase in their relationship. And an increase in their relationship equals a better working relationship, which means that they can get to the bottom of this deviant epidemic faster.

And now, that itchiness is beginning to gather under his skin again. His internal dialogue keeps getting cut off with random—true!—thoughts, and it's beginning to flicker his LED. He's off-kilter, off balance, everything is *wrong wrong wrong wrong*. *This isn't his body; these aren't his thoughts. Wrong wrong wrong.*

Tommy blinks rapidly and forcibly shoves his thoughts back to the problem at hand.

Schlatt grins, sleazy and pleased. While it's good that Wilbur is willing to come to Tommy's defense, it reveals too many of his cards. It gives something for Schlatt to easily latch onto; something that clearly upsets Wilbur. Another target to shoot at.

"What? Don't tell me you actually *like* the thing?"

Wilbur says nothing, which is almost as bad as saying something.

His grin widens, and he throws his head back, exposing his stubbled throat. His laugh is big and boisterous, but it's eventually lost to the noise of the room. A few people glance up, but, as this is a common occurrence, they ignore it. "Holy shit, you *do*!" he says, beady little eyes lighting up like a kid on Christmas. The red is back in his ears, but Wilbur's face is cool and calculating. "That's fucking hilarious!"

Wilbur scowls and crosses his arms over his chest. Tommy, meanwhile, scratches, absent-mindedly, at his arm. His blunt nails barely even register against the numbness. "Right. Well, at least I have a partner that actually sticks around."

Just like that, the smile drops from his face. Schlatt pulls his lips back into a wordless snarl. "The kid was slowing me down."

Wilbur smiles. "Sure, if that's what you want to tell yourself. What was it that Q said?" he turns toward Tommy, as if asking him. Tommy knows, even though he's floating a million miles away, that he's not. This is just another part of the performance. No input from him is needed; Tommy isn't sure he'd be able to provide it, even if it was. "Oh, right. Something about you being too much of an asshole for him to stand."

It's not true. Blatant lies.

But Schlatt's face darkens with an ugly purple red color, and Wilbur makes a quietly pleased noise. He pushes off from the desk to invade Wilbur's space. One of his fingers presses against Wilbur's chest.

"Whatever he said was a fucking lie," he hisses, and oh.

Oh, that's... *wrong*. Tommy has enough awareness, even through the wrongness and the itching beneath his skin, to realize how upsetting that is.

Androids don't feel things.

Tommy's nails bite down into his arm. The dull pressure against his skin as his blunt nails punctures it is enough to pull him closer to Earth. Right, of course androids don't feel things. He isn't capable of feeling things, other than sensations, like the cool thirium beginning to leak out from quickly closing wounds. He wasn't upset by the situation—he couldn't be, after all—but the situation itself could be considered upsetting. To a human.

Quackity had been very vague when explaining the reasons for their separation. But there had been an inherent uneasiness about him. Like he was nervous about saying the wrong thing. Like he was worried someone would push too hard, ask too many questions.

And now here's Schlatt, angry and bitter and with poisonous words, saying something that sounds so wrong. If they parted on relatively good terms, why would he believe that Quackity would be spreading lies about him? Why would he be so angry?

He doesn't know, but it shouldn't matter. It shouldn't matter because Quackity isn't his problem; he isn't on the list of goals and things to achieve. He's just some guy that works at the police station; he's just some guy that sometimes hangs around Wilbur, with a bright smile and a too warm body and a personal space issue.

It hurts his brain to think about it, so he pushes it to the side.

Androids don't feel pain.

Right.

Tommy isn't in pain. There's an odd sensation pounding at the base of his artificial skull, something traveling through his wires and into his brain. There's too much code flickering across his vision; there are too many sensations—the low buzz of conversation, his nails digging into his skin, Schlatt's expensive cologne—and he can't possibly focus on all of them at once.

That low heat is back in his chest. It's grown quicker the more he feels it, and by the time he realizes it's there, it's already spreading up his shoulders and nearing his head. Tommy takes a few unnecessary breaths and pictures the sun behind closed eyelids.

"Really? Cause all he really said was that you two had different work styles." While Wilbur's smile is smug, his eyes are sharp and unforgiving. "So, clearly, he *was* fucking lying. Because why else would you be afraid of that?"

And Tommy is once again reminded of how *good* Wilbur is when he's not a drunken mess. But with clean, unstained clothes, hair still damp around the edges with his fresh shower, and the sharp look in his eyes, he's a force to be reckoned with.

"You think you're so smart, don't you?" And somehow, Schlatt has gotten even closer. Their noses are so close to touching. It's both an absurd and intimidating scene. Tommy doesn't know whether to laugh or to push an arm in between them. He settles for scratching at his

skin in an attempt to quell both the itchiness and the heat that only grows with each passing second. "But you're nothing but a fucking moron."

Wilbur bares his teeth.

"That job should be mine." It comes out of left field, at least for Tommy, but Wilbur doesn't look surprised. If anything, he looks deeply annoyed, as if this is a conversation they've had a million times. "I'm better at this than you ever have been. And the only reason you got it is because your—" his voice pitches low. "—incapable, idiot of a father decided to throw a bone to his equally incapable son."

Schlatt pushes out with his hands, and the flat of his palm meets Wilbur's chest. It sends him back until his hip hits the desk opposite of Schlatt's.

The noise isn't helping. His constant snarled words paired with the constant buzz paired with the clatter of the things on the desk, the skid of the wood against the floor. It's all building into burning heat singeing through his veins. His fingers itch to bury themselves into his hair and pull until all the fake strands pop free from their plastic cage.

"It should've been mine in the first place, and it definitely should be mine now. You've fallen so far; you should've been fired two years ago when you made it clear you couldn't handle a fucking thing."

And well, that's just the last straw. Because Tommy might not know what happened two years ago, but from everyone's accounts—and from Wilbur's clear decline in performance paired with his subsequent increase in disciplinary warnings—it was clear that something happened. Something devastating and life-changing. Something that Wilbur still hadn't recovered from.

And the heat is maddening. It's mind-numbing, and it makes Tommy forget his own consciousness hanging just to the left of where it usually is.

"Do you ever shut the fuck up? Or do you just get off on the sound of your own voice?"

Dead silence.

The entire prescient comes to a standstill. Hands halt in their rapid scrawl across papers, the hushed conversations fall silent, and the subtle gestures to Schlatt and Wilbur become fully fledged stares. The entire prescient gapes in the scene they make. One guy's jaw drops so far that the chewed up donut falls from his mouth and lands on his desk with a disgustingly wet plop.

Schlatt's face is completely slack with disbelief; his eyes are as wide as saucers, and his brows are raised to meet his hairline. It's viscerally satisfying to watch that smug, bitter look be completely wiped away and replaced with whatever this is. Unsettled and off balance and unexpected. He talks a big game, but it's always surprising when the android bites back.

And then, from across the entire, silent room, Quackity throws his head back and laughs.

It's just as ridiculous as all his laughs are: high-pitched and giggly and uncontrollable. It shakes his small frame, forces tears out of his eyes, and, eventually, has him doubling over until he clutches at his stomach. The man next to him, an awkward sort of guy with rectangle glasses and suspenders that are twisted and out of order, pats him on the back just shy of too hard.

Relationship with Quackity: Friend ^

Quackity just laughs and laughs and laughs until it's the only sound filling the empty space the noise left behind. He laughs until he has to reach out with a shaking hand to steady himself against a nearby desk, nearly knocking the carefully assorted folders and wooden framed photos in the process.

The laughter rings in his ears, but the slight movement of Wilbur's arm as it brushes against his steals his focus. He turns, still lost in the hazy mood of today, so he can catch sight of Wilbur. Wilbur who, despite the hand smothering his grinning mouth, is shaking with suppressed laughter. His pathetic attempt works, for a time, but as soon as Quackity's voice starts to pitch into the hiccupping sort of laughter, it bursts through like a dam.

Their laughter mixes together, harmonizing into the sound of angels, and fills the room. Tommy can't hold back the smile that spreads across his face, even if he was so inclined.

That dull, wine purple color is back, coating Schlatt's face unattractively. His hands grip the edge of his desk until his thick knuckles go white.

Wilbur, laughter still spilling from his dry, cracked lips, slings an arm around Tommy's shoulders. It's easy, almost natural, and Wilbur's body stays lax against his. It isn't like the last time he so carelessly tosses his arm around Tommy's shoulders, despite it being in front of the same man. It isn't out of spite or to make Schlatt jealous, or whatever Wilbur was trying to accomplish that first time.

Instead, it's to gently steer Tommy from a threat; Schlatt is positively fuming, tension coiling his muscles like a tiger ready to lash out. But Wilbur turns his back to him, easily, and steers them towards their little cluster of desks.

As soon as Wilbur sinks into his chair—with Tommy awkwardly hovering over him, out of place and unsure and all *wrong*—Quackity is already making a beeline right for them. One hand is behind him, holding his odd companion's wrist in a loose hold.

Slowly but surely, sound has returned to the office. It's still hushed right now; people gather in small groups, heads ducked until little space exists between them. They're, undoubtedly, discussing what just occurred. As Tommy glances around, he catches sight of all sorts of expressions: suppressed glee, furrowed concern, plain confusion.

Before he can take in the entire room, analyze each and every face tick and determine its meaning, Quackity is there. He takes up Tommy's entire vision, hands immediately wrapping around Tommy in an aggressive hug that almost sends both of them careening towards the floor.

"Thomas!" he cries, one hand burning Tommy's face as it presses against his cheek.

"Big Q," Tommy says, allowing himself to be manhandled and molded by Quackity's incessant hands. Orbiting the same space as Quackity is like standing before an energetic yet impossibly affectionate storm. He moves like a whirlwind, hands never still as they run through his hair and trail over his face. His body is always too hot, and he presses himself against whoever's nearest like he'll die if he doesn't.

Even now, pulling away minuscule from their hug, Quackity slumps almost his entire weight against him. The hand buried in his messy curls rubs aggressively. "I'm so fucking proud of you man," he says and, from the sincerity bleeding into his tone, he means it. Something warm and oppressive settles in his chest. Quackity pats his cheek with an affectionate hand. "You take after your papi!"

Wilbur chokes, plastic water bottle raised to his lips—another concession, a gift from Tommy. Water sloshes, unattractively, down his chin, and he wipes it away with the back of his hand. He laughs, then, high and clear without the water or plastic to obscure it.

Tommy still isn't used to the sound; he might get used to it, but he'll never get over the fact that Tommy made Wilbur laugh. The image of him, eyes squeezed shut with amusement, will be burned into his brain forever.

Wilbur laughs, now, and claps Quackity on the shoulder. "You're one weird guy," he says, lips tilted in that uneven way of his and words colored with fondness.

Tommy blatantly ignores Q's last sentence and instead focuses on the praise and warmth. "It was pretty cool, wasn't it?" Reluctantly, he allows a smile onto his face. He lets Quackity fawn over him like a proud parent, mouth moving a mile a minute to coo and spew sugary praise. One hand remains on his cheek while the other curls protectively around the nape of his neck, fingers get caught in the small curls that sit there.

Quackity pulls him in for another hug. It leaves Tommy's chin digging into his shoulder and allows him to make direct eye contact with his odd companion. The man smiles, and he raises his hand in the smallest, most awkward wave he's ever seen. It's almost alarming how endearing it is.

When Quackity finally pulls away—and it does take a minute, that clingy bastard—he instinctively follows Tommy's gaze. When he finds the object of his attention, the wide smile on his face dims, in an unsure sort of way. He nods, jerkily, towards the man. "Boys, this is the newest detective and my new partner, Charlie. Charlie, this—" he claps an aggressive hand onto Wilbur's shoulder with a grin. "—is Lieutenant Wilbur Soot, and his partner, Tommy."

Charlie glances between them.

Tommy doesn't miss the way his eyes are drawn to the circling LED on his temple, but, for his part, the cheerful, guileless expression never falters. "Hello, Lieutenant Wilbur Soot, and android Tommy Innit. It's nice to meet you."

It should raise his metaphoric hackles,

Well, it shouldn't, because he's an android, and nothing bothers him because he doesn't have emotions or feelings to be bothered. Instead, it should invoke some deep sense of failure. He is so not human and is doing such a poor job at assimilating that Charlie feels the need to point it out.

And yet, it's said with the same sort of reverence as Wilbur's title.

Wilbur raises a brow. A slow, confused smile spreads over his face. "Look, man, you can just call me Wilbur," he says with a slight laugh. "No need to be so formal."

Meanwhile, Quackity is staring incredulously, jaw dropped until he's fully gaping. His mouth soon splits into a disbelieving grin. "What did you just call him?" he says to Charlie.

Charlie gestures to Tommy's suit jacket, where his model type—1NN1T—is plastered over the left side of his chest in large letters. "Innit," he says again, confidently. "Isn't that your last name?" He says it so innocently, so completely unknowingly, that Quackity and Wilbur immediately dissolve into giggles, like the children they are.

But even Tommy has to smother his smile behind his palm. Charlie's naivety is as oddly comforting as it is refreshing. At the raucous his words cause, Charlie looks to Tommy with confusion furrowing his brow. "Do androids not have last names?"

"Not really," Wilbur says through breathless laughter.

"This is my model type," Tommy tells him kindly, finger tapping against the label.

"Yeah, how did you—" Quackity's voice cracks with a snort. "Dude, it's got fucking numbers in it. How did you think—" he cuts himself off with a brisk shake of his head. "Besides, isn't it pronounced one-N-N-one-T?"

Charlie narrows his eyes. "Well, maybe. But look." He reaches out, and Tommy lets him tap his own fingers against the number. His nail lingers on the first number. "This one kind of looks like an I, doesn't it?"

Quackity shrugs. "I guess." But then he's squinting as well and ducking his head to stare, closely, at the numbers lining his chest.

"So," Wilbur says, running a careless hand through his curls. They've dried completely by now, but they're frizzy with the air that dried them and stick up in odd ways. "What's with the get up?" He gestures to Charlie's outfit. It is strange, especially compared to Quackity and Wilbur's less than formal clothes. He's wearing gray slacks with a white button up and those twisted suspenders. "Are you some kind of old-timey cosplayer, or something?"

Quackity snorts. His hand lands on Charlie's shoulder, squeezing it in solidarity. "What did I tell you, man."

Charlie glances down at his outfit. His thumbs slip underneath the suspenders; he pulls them away from his body only for them to slap against his body with a meaty sound. "I wanted to

make a good first impression. Besides, Tommy's in a suit," he points out, as if to say 'hey, I'm not the only weird one here.' It doesn't work as well as he hoped.

"*Tommy*—" Wilbur says, putting a special emphasis on his name. "—is a weirdo."

Tommy frowns. "*Tommy* doesn't have any other clothes."

"Ew," Quackity says, nose scrunching up. "Don't talk about yourself in the third person. It's not as cute as you think."

"I wasn't trying to be cute!"

Very quickly, the conversation dissolves into a mock argument. Both Charlie and Wilbur, who have migrated together due to the twin laughter that shakes their shoulders, are doing a poor job at disguising their amusement. The argument ends, as most of Tommy and Quackity's interactions do, with Quackity slinging an arm around his shoulders and roughly rubbing his knuckles against Tommy's scalp.

The two leave shortly after that; Quackity is all dimpling smiles and relaxed shoulders, and Charlie... Tommy doesn't know how to read Charlie yet. *He's an odd fellow*, he decides, *but that's not a bad thing*.

Wilbur and Tommy sink into their work. Wilbur types frantically at his keyboard, face scrunched up with concentration. He breaks only to reach out with a blind hand, groping around until he finds the water bottle to take a few sips. Meanwhile, Tommy spends his time rearranging, re-writing, and adding a few more tidbits of information to the case document he compiled yesterday. When he deems it suitable enough, he explains his findings to Wilbur.

Wilbur takes in the information with a knuckle pressed to his lips. He nods at the appropriate times and hums with appreciation when Tommy points out a particularly interesting part of his observations. When he finishes it up with a rough summary—"Basically, we know jack shit. We need to come in contact with more deviants if we hope to learn anything more."—he sends the document to Wilbur upon request.

And then he does... absolutely fucking nothing.

There are no more cases for him to go over; there's no new information to consider. He sits, completely useless, and he watches. He watches as Wilbur takes out his shitty little notebook, spreading the pages open so he can scrawl his own notes down as he reads the document.

Officers still move, like fluid, through the office. His eyes are inevitably drawn to Techno, as if his eyes were magnets and Techno made of nickel or iron or maybe even cobalt. He's abandoned his forced socialization and sinks down into his own desk chair, fingers threaded through his hair in a tight grip. He looks lost and forlorn, an unusual expressive expression twisted onto him.

Tommy wonders if Techno wants his brother back so much that he sobs with it on the floor of his kitchen. He wonders if Techno, too, is broken. If hairline fractures line his skin like fragile glass.

He wonders what it would take to fix him, to fix Wilbur. To fix *them*. To make their relationship whole again.

Androids only follow missions and orders.

That low buzzing is back in the base of his skull. He hadn't noticed how it had faded and quieted with Quackity's hands burning his skin, with Wilbur's laugh echoing in his ears. He hadn't realized how such a simple interaction could ground him, but now, with the low murmur of quiet conversations, it consumes him. He's lost to the hum of his own system, fingernails scratching against his psyche as he tries to hang on.

Before he knows it, he's standing. The urge to be useful is a desperate itch under his skin, and it's almost as distracting and mind-numbing as the buzz. Wilbur looks at him weirdly, but, after some muttered excuses, he slips away easily.

The holding cells aren't very large.

It's one of the first things that Tommy notices as he slows his frantic steps in front of a row of about five cells. Each of them is about seven feet wide with a thick, horizontal platform fixed to one wall. On top of each of them is a thin bedroll and no pillow.

It doesn't look comfortable at all. The flat mattress—if it can even be called that—can't cushion the human body at all. The fluorescent lights and the tempered glass that separates them allow for full sight into the cell.

But the point of it isn't comfort.

The idea is that if you commit a crime, you atone, at least in part, through your discomfort. Through the full body aches from sleeping on hard ground and a neck crick from the lack of a pillow. It seems inhumane, just a little bit.

The human two cells down is clearly having a *thrilling* time. He's bent over, elbows propped on his knees. His face is stern and his eyes stationary, fixed on some empty corner of his cell. When Tommy passes by, footsteps as silent as they can be against the polished floor, the man shoots him a glare.

Tommy continues, unperturbed.

There are no human guards stationed outside Niki's cell anymore. When she was newer and seemingly more volatile—eyes cold and assessing, unpredictable but calculating; Tommy couldn't decide if that was scarier than blind, teeth-gnashing rage—she was never seen without one. They waited outside her cell for some inevitable move; they shepherded her from holding cell to interrogation room. They viewed her with suspicion and blatant disgust.

But now, her stay is a bit more permanent and her attitude a bit too docile. The officers have more important things to do than stand, stationary and ever-vigilante, outside the cell of someone who has all the appearances of being beaten down.

Tommy knows, however, that this is when she is at her most dangerous. When their guards are collectively lowered, when she blinks at them with reluctant acceptance. Tommy seeks her out, but he doesn't, for one foolish second, *trust* her.

She isn't paying attention when he comes to a standstill in front of her cell. She's seated on her pathetic excuse for a bed, back ramrod straight and the knobs of her spine pressed against the concrete walls. Her head is tilted back, eyes closed lightly. She looks peaceful, serene almost. Her arms are wrapped around her knees, bringing them against her chest.

She is not huddled against the world, back curving protectively as she hunches in on herself. She is no frightened creature.

Niki is languid, relaxed. Vaguely reminiscent of a predator taking a moment to stretch out in between hunts.

She doesn't acknowledge his presence at all; not even with the slow crack of an eyelid to see who's crowding her window. Even when he settles down against the ground—cool and vaguely grimy, making his nose scrunch up and his hands press, safely, into his lap—she doesn't look up.

For a second, Tommy entertains the idea that she's in stasis mode. But her face, while relaxed, is not slack with a familiar unawareness. The longer he lingers, scanning the smooth expanse of her broad forehead, the more he notices the tension slowly creeping in.

Niki lasts until her LED flickers yellow. It casts a brief warning light against the gray walls, and then her eyes are snapping open, finding him immediately. "What?" she says. There is no warmth in her tone, only irritation with a harsh scowl marring her face.

When she takes him in, her furrowed brow smooths out. "Oh, Tommy." And, just like that, there is no hint of the aggression from before. He doesn't know when he wormed his way into her good graces—maybe between promising his help and getting her patched up—or even *how* but he's infinitely grateful for it.

Androids don't feel things.

It's a good thing that he did befriend her. She's undoubtedly a force to be reckoned with, even contained behind glass. A caged tiger is still a tiger after all.

"Hello," he greets, blinking rapidly to dispel the fog that threatens to consume him once more.

She smiles. "Hello." Dropping one leg to the ground, she swings her body until she's sitting on the edge facing Tommy. Then, she leans forward, hands clenched around the thick platform underneath as she glances around for the familiar faces of her usual guards. "I imagine we're going to the interrogation room?"

Tommy shifts, folding his legs beneath him until his knees press against the glass. It's cool from the air conditioning, even through the thin layer of his pants, and the sensation grounds him a little. "Not today," he tells her, because he doesn't have any questions of importance to

ask. Nothing relevant to the case or androids or deviants circles in the buzzing in his brain. "I thought we could just talk here."

Uncertainty floods her expression, and Niki's LED flickers to yellow once again. "...Okay." She looks to each side of her cell, but there's no one lingering nearby. No one even spares them a second glance, as if an android sitting in front of their cells is *normal*. Or maybe they just don't even register androids, anymore, as worthy of their holy attention.

The thought makes Tommy's face scrunch up automatically, and the buzzing gets louder, more insistent. A warning.

He wisely redirects his thoughts.

Niki slides off the platform, hands poised on the edge to lower her to the ground. She settles down right in front of him, knees pressed against the glass where his are, so they're aligned. It's only then that he notices how *small* she is. She looks up through his lashes, and Tommy feels the urge to reach out.

He does, after a moment of hesitation, hand pressed against the grounding glass. His hand doesn't fog up with the nonexistent heat of his hand, like a human's would. Tommy presses harder against the glass until he can see the strain of it in his arm.

With a furrowed brow, Niki surveys him. He sees the way her eyes linger on his pressed palm, on the slight shaking of his arm, on the steady, deceitful blue of his LED. Everything is not fine, and yet, his body registers no warnings. When she finally finds his face, Tommy smiles.

He doesn't know what it looks like, if it's as hopelessly mechanical as all his other smiles. But Niki softens when she sees it. And, after a moment, she raises her own hand to line up against his. He can't feel her system through the—surprisingly—thick glass, like a yawning chasm with no way to cross. It feels wrong, alien in a way. Without meaning to, the skin around his hand melts away until only his bare chassis, with all its tiny scratches and imperfections, remains.

Tommy doesn't know how to describe the emotion that morphs Niki's features. But that's okay. He doesn't think anything good will come of knowing.

Slowly, her own skin melts away. Instead of stopping at the wrist, like Tommy did, she allows her entire forearm to show. It allows him a look at the pale line of her scar.

"How are you?" Tommy asks when he's able to pry his eyes from their white hands, both tinged with identifying marks.

Niki is quiet for a long moment; her attention is still fixed on their hands. There's a small crease between her brows, as if she's trying to work out a particularly difficult puzzle but is missing a few pieces. Tommy doesn't like the look—doesn't like Niki knowing more than she absolutely needs to, because the sharp glint in her eyes is too dangerous to leave alone—and so he drops his hand back into his lap.

Something drops in his stomach as well, and he tries not to let his discomfort show on his face.

It's only when the skin has completely swallowed up his hand that Niki blinks and glances back at him. "I'm... as well as one can be when living on borrowed time, I suppose." Her tone is light-hearted, breezy even. Her hand drops back into her lap, and she delicately threads her fingers together.

But there's something underlying it all—a gentle tension thrumming through her body, or maybe something steely underneath all of her words. When she takes in his contorted expression, she smiles. It doesn't look right on her face, and it certainly doesn't radiate any warmth. "I can't exactly enjoy life when I know that, at any second, you or any of you—" her eyes flicker behind him, where Wilbur is chewing on the end of one of his pens. "—*superiors* could decide I would be more helpful as a pile of scraps."

And, well, that's true. He doesn't know exactly how it would shake out—if Wilbur's word would be deemed more important than his, if Wilbur decided against keeping Niki around. It's stupid, though, and completely irrelevant. Wilbur had been the one to suggest—read *order*—her continued existence.

Tommy shakes his head. "I won't let that happen," he says earnestly. She's much more useful to them as a living, breathing resource to consult in order to understand deviants. And when she's not... when the unfortunate time comes when she's outlasted her use...

Tommy pushes those thoughts away when his LED threatens to flicker. The buzzing in his head grows louder again, another warning. "And you don't have to worry about Wilbur," he says instead, fingers fiddling around until he produces his coin out of his pocket. It's smooth and warm from being tucked in his pocket. He runs his thumb along the ridged edge. "If you remember, he's the one that suggested this—" a brief pause, barely even noticeable to a human. "—arrangement in the first place."

Her mouth curls into a small smile, the corners tilted ever so faintly. It's an expression he's seen often on her; the sort of soft, tired look he gets whenever he awkwardly avoids words that might upset her. She shakes her head, in a sort of exasperatedly fond way, and Tommy is struck breathless, taking in her mannerisms.

Tommy leans forward with wide eyes. "How do you *do that*?" he breathes before he's even aware of the thought forming, of his mouth moving around the shape of the letters.

Her expression drops. "What do you mean?"

"How do you smile so naturally?"

For her, there was no mechanical smile. No rigidity in her soft cheeks nor a void of emotion in her eyes. She looked just like a human, save for the LED embedded in her temple.

And Tommy... doesn't know what to think about that.

So he simply doesn't. Just like so many thoughts before it, he shoves it far away into some dark crevice of his thoughts to never be brought out again. Instead, he drops his attention to the coin fitting snugly in his palm. He admires the strong jaw of George Washington and his prominent nose. "I'm supposed to be this... advanced prototype with complex social programs. I'm supposed to be capable of adapting and fitting in with humans."

He thinks of Wilbur and whatever this thing—he wouldn't dare use the word friendship, but maybe... partnership? Companionship?—that is slowly but surely blossoming between them. He thinks of the sudden drop in his expressions, no matter how minuscule, whenever he sees the unfortunately mechanical smile on his face or the blankness in his eyes.

At this point, his inability to sculpt his expression in the necessary, *human*, ways is becoming a hazard to his mission.

"And I—" he makes a frustrated noise. His fingers itch to be buried in his hair, tugging until there's some sharp pressure in his scalp. His head buzzes. "I *can't*."

Niki regards him with some unreadable expression. He doesn't want to look at her; he doesn't want to begin to unravel the complexities of her features. And for a second, a sharp, poignant second, Tommy's sure she's going to ignore him. How could he possibly match his ridiculous problem with hers, of life and death.

But then she gestures to him with a contemplative look. "Smile for me."

Tommy smiles without hesitation. He feels the way it stretches his cheeks; he knows about the unnatural wideness of his eyes because no matter how hard he focuses, it won't change.

Niki nods to herself as she assesses each and every little problem. "Forced smiles are never natural," she tells him, wisely, as she continues to survey his expression. "There's always something... just wrong about them. You can tell when a human is forcing a smile, right?"

It's the disconnect, he thinks, between the eyes and the mouth. While the lips may be curved, the eyes are the window to the soul. Tommy nods.

"It's like that. You're smiling but you're not feeling the emotion in here." Niki raps her knuckles against the glass, her finger pointing above the left side of his chest where his thirium pump beats away, ignorant.

Androids don't feel things.

Tommy sighs, low and quiet, through his nose. "Great," he says, digging his bony elbows into his knees. "So I'm fucked, basically." Because he's an android, and androids don't feel things. How is he supposed to have a natural, human smile when he is literally incapable of it?

Short answer, obviously he's not. His mission is always going to be locked behind this one barrier, the only thing keeping him from his full potential. It's times like this that he wants to curse his programmers for their short-sightedness.

When he looks up, Niki is watching him with a certain kind of intensity. "Not necessarily. You could always find something that makes you happy."

"Makes me—" he cuts off with a choked noise. The buzzing slowly increases from a low thrum at the base of his skull until it's consuming and clouding his thoughts. Tommy blinks, rubbing at his temple where an odd sort of pressure is beginning to build.

Niki must not be able to sense the sudden shift in him, because she's smiling now. It's a slow, creeping thing that transforms her entire being, lightening the dull cell. "Yeah. Find something that makes you smile naturally."

Something that...

The buzzing drowns out his thoughts. It's unbearable, spreading down his tense neck and clenching all of the nearby muscles with its tension. His breath catches in his throat, and his vision fogs over until all he can see is the peach-pink of Niki's blurred out face. He can't hear her words anymore, if she's even saying anything.

With a noise Tommy can't hear, he hunches over, fingers threading into golden locks. He indulges himself, hands tightening until his hair pulls at the plastic of his scalp. It's satisfying, in a way, if only because it reduces the buzzing enough for him to hear Niki's garbled concern. Tommy lets his hands slip out of his tangled strands until they rest over his ears. He presses down, then, despite the fact that the noise can't be blocked out. It's in his blood.

It's maddening in its intensity. The noise is only growing stronger until he can feel the vibrations in his head, in his throat, in his thirium pump. It's everywhere and everything, and it's *him*. And before he knows it, despite the fact that he can't *hear anything*, his mouth is opening and an endless stream of babble is spilling out.

Tommy doesn't know if there is actually any sound coming out, or his lips just move frantically around the letters, but it seems to soothe his internal battle. Like the fading tides of the sea, external noise returns to him in slow waves. And when he can finally hear again, he's still speaking. "—just an android. I'm not capable of feeling anything so it's foolish to even think of pursuing happiness. I only seek to accomplish my mission and any orders I receive. I exist to be useful."

The words already feel familiar in his mouth, and, as he tapers off into a tense, panting silence, he realizes he must've been repeating them over and over again.

When he eventually braves a look at Niki, he finds her watching him with sadness. Something beyond words and empathy. "What was that?" she asks in a voice that is a low, terrified whisper.

But, already, the feeling of buzzing is fading away until he can't remember what it felt like. He's already beginning to forget the feeling of nails digging into his skull. Tommy blinks. "What was what?"

If it's even possible, Niki looks even sadder. "Oh, Tommy," she breathes, pressing her lips together into a thin, displeased line. "You don't need to have a use."

Tommy doesn't believe her, but he shifts, uncomfortable, under her intense gaze. After too long, he nods, fervently, until she looks satisfied. Satisfied, but not happy. Something in her expression—the tension around her mouth, maybe—tells him that she knows he doesn't believe it. She, at least, seems to realize a lost cause when she sees it.

And just like that, they tumble back into a tense silence. Niki's fingers tap an erratic rhythm into the much cleaner floor of her cell. Meanwhile, Tommy bows his head over his lap, fingers easily finding the stray threads along the cuff of his sleeve. He owns a total of two outfits—if an object could even own things—and both of them had gone through hell. Just last night, he threw out the other one, since the white shirt was irreparably stained with wine, blood, and thirium.

"You really aren't going to ask me any questions, are you?"

Tommy glances up. Niki is staring at him with that same, indecipherable look.

"No," he says, simply. "I was under the impression that you didn't want me to, am I wrong?"

Niki shakes her head. It makes her hair swish around her shoulders. "No, but I'm not used to having what I want taken into consideration."

And what is Tommy supposed to say to that?

They fall back into that silence, bordering on uncomfortable. Tommy's fingers probe the skin around his eyes, where all the problems regarding his smile had originated. That smooth expanse of skin, with its tense, artificial muscle and the buzzing wires that run commands that can't be followed in the form of electrical currents. It's almost like a human body but not.

When it becomes clear that Tommy has nothing to say, lost to a vortex of his own thoughts and buzzing at the base of his skull, Niki taps her fingers against the floor.

"What was all that about?" she asks, nodding with her head towards something behind him. With a quick glance over his shoulder, he finds that her gaze has fallen on Wilbur. "I have ears, you know." Tommy turns back to face her, mouth pulled down into a frown. "Since when do you defend Lieutenant Soot? Or is it Wilbur, now?"

His mind is still cloudy. He doesn't know what she's insinuating here, but, from her mischievous look, it can't be anything good.

A strange heat settles in his face. Niki's face goes slack and then, unexpectedly, delighted. He doesn't know what that's about, so he wisely ignores it as best he can. "He's my partner right now. We've just started getting along, and I don't want anything to ruin that," he explains, shoulders hiking up to his ears in defense. Niki keeps staring at him, however, hand raised to smother the giant smile splitter her face. "*What?*"

"It's just—you—" she grins so wide, teeth sinking into her bottom lip to stifle it. "Oh my god—you—" The frustration is back, and it singes his skin. Tommy doesn't understand what her sudden glee is about, unless she's become unusually devoted to his and Wilbur's developing

relationship. Niki covers her face with her hand, pressing her palm with its spread fingers across her nose and brow bone.

It does absolutely nothing to hide her amusement. "It's nothing."

"Well, clearly, it's not *nothing*," he says. "Tell me."

Niki shakes her head and attempts a stern look. As her eyes are still crinkled closed with joy, it achieves absolutely nothing, and Tommy huffs his displeasure. When she's finally settled down, lips still curved into a soft smile, she shakes her head again. "You mentioned things have gotten better between you two?"

The office behind them has long since recovered from the shock of witnessing an android yelling at one of their—more disliked—detectives. The room is whipped back into that special frenzy of fluttering sheets of paper and frantic conversations.

Everything about them screams importance. And then there's Tommy, sitting on the floor with his knees pressed against the tempered glass of a holding cell.

It's scarily easy to forget that Niki's there. She has some talent for making herself small, and unobtrusive. He hadn't realized how steady her silent presence was until now, invading his life and listening in on hushed conversations. After all, she was there when George had asked; and he, clearly, hadn't seen her for the threat that she was, just a defective machine they were keeping well past her due date.

But Tommy knew she was a threat. It was, however, easy to forget.

"He has... opened up about some things," he says slowly, carefully. Then, Tommy makes a face. "I suppose I have, as well."

Her icy gaze slips right off him and lands over his shoulder, where Wilbur is sat far away. "That's nice," Niki says, although Tommy gets the distinct feeling that she isn't telling the truth. As if sensing this, she smiles. "For you. I don't... trust him."

"You don't trust humans," he corrects. Tommy has seen the way she looks at them, like a frightened animal ready to lash out the first sign of aggression.

Niki simply shrugs. "That's true. But he seems... likeable. Charismatic." She shakes her head. "I don't trust that."

Tommy glances over his shoulder.

Wilbur is hunched over his desk, both elbows digging into the hard surface. One hand is buried in his already messy curls while the other clutches a pen between slim fingers. He taps the pen against the notepad, undoubtedly leaving tiny marks all over the paper, as he works his bottom lip between his teeth.

And, despite himself, despite the fog still settling on his skin, making it feel like it isn't his skin, he smiles. Tommy shrugs, and with a softness that betrays too much, he says, "He's not so bad sometimes."

Chapter End Notes

Niki: *literally just existing*

Tommy: Yep that's an apex predator all right. She could kill me in a second, given the chance

Also!!!! To any of you who followed me on Twitter (it's NymphiiWrites, for anyone who wants to know) thank you! Literally forgot I had twitter for a hot second and checked it randomly to find people had actually followed me??? And also also!!!!!! @Sbartdump made the cutest fucking little gif of Tommy jamming out and a stunning drawing of The Hug??? They're both so cute please check it out :)

And if anyone else makes art for this fic, I will cry /pos

And and also can someone please tell me how the fuck to use twitter? Like what do I tweet about? What do people want to know???

schrodinger's deviant

Chapter Notes

This chapter's a little nasty. TW for unclean living situation and in-depth descriptions of mold, bird feces, and other nasty things like that. Also maybe a little bit of android gore? If that's something that needs to be accounted for

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Chapter Seventeen: Schrodinger's Deviant

—
October 20th, 2038

2:32 PM

"You know, when I said you had to eat more, this isn't exactly what I meant."

The Chicken Feed, or the rickety sign—that sways with even the slightest breeze—proclaims, is, quite decidedly, not a sight for sore eyes. It's a proverbial hunk of junk, a small metal food truck glinting in the practically non-existent sunlight hidden behind a thick blanket of grey, stormy clouds.

The inside—which Tommy can see through a small, square opening that the owner keeps sticking his sweat-shiny, bald head out of—isn't much better. From what he can see, it's greasy and unsanitary, and it reeks of fast, oily, and, most importantly, *unhealthy* food.

Even still, Wilbur doesn't seem to care, and his greedy hands reach out for a burger wrapped in grimy tin foil. As he takes a large, obnoxious, slurp from his jumbo-sized soda—which Tommy is half convinced he bought for the sole reason of seeing Tommy's lips spasm into a frown—Wilbur tosses a smug look over his shoulder.

"Well, too bad," he says, ever petulant like the spoiled brat he is. Giving a brief, thankful nod to the owner, he begins to trail away from the food truck itself and towards the 'seating area'. Tommy lingers for a moment, eyes stuck on the beady eyes of the owner. Information pops up when he looks at the man—including a myriad of minor crimes and misdemeanors, like *health code violations, Wilbur*—but Tommy has been getting better at tuning the useless information out. "You can't have it both ways."

He trails behind Wilbur like a lost puppy, droplets of fresh rain splattering against his cheeks as he leaves the safety of the sheltered food truck, with its umbrella overhang. The previously

mentioned 'seating area' is hardly that. It's a collection of rusting metal tables with large, colorless umbrellas stretching out from a hole in the center. There are no chairs, and it wouldn't help even if there were. The tables are too tall, stopping somewhere around his waist.

Out of all places, Tommy still isn't sure why Wilbur picked this one, other than to annoy him with his ridiculously unhealthy eating habits. The weather is abysmal, a cold dreary rain that has been off-and-on all day. While summer had lingered by the door, slow with its warm goodbyes, fall is finally here.

It's finally cold enough, he thinks as the biting wind blows right through his thin suit, *for Wilbur to wear his ridiculous coat.*

And, sure enough, Wilbur looks perfectly content with his collar turned up to protect his vulnerable neck. He stands at the too-tall tables, metal surface digging into his scrawny forearms as he leans against it; his fingers scrabbled against the tinfoil, peeling it away like some sort of soft-shelled oyster.

The burger looks no more appetizing than the venue, but Tommy can only watch Wilbur's borderline obscene expression with a disgusted scowl. "It's not good for you. At all," he says when he's had enough of the silence and the whistle of the wind. Wilbur glances up, pausing mid-chew. "Lot of calories and the, uh, the grease isn't good for— it isn't easy on the heart. It would be better if you—"

Wilbur rolls his eyes. The burger steams, ever so slightly, in the cool air. "Yeah, yeah. It's one meal, Tommy. It isn't going to kill me."

Tommy frowns, and the expression etches itself, deeply, into his face. Suddenly, the tacky gray paint covering the table is the most fascinating thing in the world. He runs his short nails over the subtle imperfections and relishes in the way they catch over them.

One meal certainly won't be the death of him, but there's no telling just how many 'one meals' he's had. Dozens, probably, if that isn't a gross understatement. These things add up. They compile until they're a tight fist around a bloody and desperately beating heart.

Wilbur must catch whatever expression warps his face, because he lets out a tired sigh. "If it bothers you that much," he says, voice exasperated, as if what he's about to say truly is some massive inconvenience. But then Tommy's gaze flickers back up, and he only finds a face softened with something undefinable yet undeniably tender. "Then I'll make it up later. I'll—" he fumbles for a moment, eyes crinkled at the corners. "I don't know. Eat a fucking vegetable, or something."

Tension oozes out of his body, and, despite himself, Tommy smiles. "You're a fucking liar," he says, hand pressing flat against his mouth. The action only seems to spur on Wilbur, who nudges him with his bony elbow. "You don't even know what a vegetable is."

Wilbur gapes; his split lips inevitably tilt upwards as he lets out a surprised huff of laughter.

"Besides," Tommy continues, smoothing his face out into something resembling neutrality.

He's gotten better at this, too. In time, he's learned the rhythm of Wilbur's dramatics, of his humor. He knows when to ignore him and when to call him out and when to make light of a serious situation. With every interaction, with every expression that lingers just a second too long, Tommy learns the hidden intricacies of Wilbur's complex language.

"You forget that I know how much *shit* is in that." He taps his temple, eyes never leaving the half-devoured burger clutched in possessive, clawed fingers. "You'd have to eat more than a vegetable. At least two."

Wilbur shakes his head, morphing his face into that dramatic, practiced disgruntlement. But he doesn't say anything further, and the duo slip into a comfortable silence. Tommy listens to the sounds of Wilbur chewing on the burger and of the distant patter of rain against wet concrete, and he presses his forehead against the cool table. The cold slowly seeps into his skin, and he lets out a soft sigh.

His body has been more strung out ever since he woke up that one fateful day. It hasn't felt like *his*, and although Tommy is learning to deal with it—he's Cyberlife's greatest creation, goddammit, he can adapt—it's left him off-kilter. It's nice to simply exist amongst the sounds of the world; the gentle, low conversations of people passing by, umbrellas held in steely fingers against the wind.

When he raises his head next, it's to the sight of Wilbur licking grease off his fingers. The wrapper sits between them, a tiny ball of tinfoil that Tommy grabs before it can blow away in the wind. "Anyway," Wilbur says when he catches Tommy's tired stare. "Deviancy." He claps his hands together, and then rubs his wet fingers off on his jeans. "What does your—" his mouth twitches into a poorly disguised frown. "—*company* have to say about it?"

Tommy blinks. "My company."

"Your company," Wilbur agrees with a nod. "Cyber... whatever."

Wilbur Soot and his fucking dramatics. "Cyberlife," Tommy says, and the reluctant amusement he was battling dies in its crib at the thought of them. He runs the rough pads of his fingers over the wrinkled skin of his knuckles. "You know their name. Don't be difficult."

Wilbur brushes him off with a lazy wave of his hand. "Yeah, sure I do." He takes a long sip of his drink, but it's nearing the end, and it makes that god awful noise almost empty drinks always do. "What information have they hoarded away from the general public? And from their good loyal friends at the station?"

The buzzing is back, low and minimally distracting. It's not so much as a threat or a warning as it is simply a reminder. He ignores the way his vision blurs, ever so slightly around the edges, and instead focuses on Wilbur's scowl. "Not much," he admits after a quiet moment.

Wilbur leans forward until they're both crowded around the table, elbows brushing together. "Tell me anyway."

The wind howls, and Tommy finds himself lost in the sensation. It sweeps along his exposed skin, drags through his hair, and pulls, instantly, at his clothes. "The popular theory is that

certain, potentially spontaneous, malfunctions occur in an android's code, which results in a kind of mimicry—"

Wilbur groans, long and drawn out, as his hands drag across his tired face. "Without being a fucking nerd, please and thank you."

Tommy scowls. "Androids aren't actually experiencing emotions. They're incapable of it. But, there's some error that occurs that we haven't yet determined the cause of. This is what results in the illusion of emotion, at least from a deviant's perspective." He pulls a face, brow furrowing in consideration. "And maybe the humans, as well, although there haven't been any cases of humans being positively involved, excluding, of course, Ranboo and Michael—"

The rest of his words are lost to the wind, pattering out into a frantic and hurried mumbling. His thumb has found its way to his lips, and he gently chews on the tip of his nail. Michael was the only case of a positive human interaction with deviants, but he was a child. Tommy wonders how an adult would react to deviants; if they, too, would be fooled by it.

Thinking back on it, Niki can be pretty persuasive at times.

Tommy blinks suddenly, LED circling yellow. He sits up suddenly, and, when he looks at Wilbur, his face is relaxed and warm. "A possible deviant sighting was just reported," he explains, scanning the virtual documents with vigor. "It's only a few blocks from here."

Wilbur hums his acknowledgement, but his eyes are locked on some spot behind him. When Tommy turns to see, he finds a new customer approaching the truck. "Yeah, we'll go check it out." Crushing the Styrofoam cup in his hand, he holds the mess out for Tommy. Understanding the implications, Tommy fishes around in his pocket until he settles the ball of tinfoil into Wilbur's hand. "I just gotta do something first."

"Wilbur—" Tommy tries, but he's long gone. For a moment, he watches as Wilbur walks towards the newcomer, free hand slipping into his back pocket. After a few awkward attempts, he manages to pull out his wallet. The facial recognition scan so kindly informs him that this man—whose expressive face is raised in surprise at the sight of Wilbur—has a record, including gambling.

With a sigh, Tommy shoves his hands into the depths of his pockets. He forgoes the safety of the umbrella to cross the slick street, deftly avoiding large puddles. When he's tucked away into the car, head settling back into the cushiony seat and eyes lingering on Wilbur, he decides that there is no better time than to make his report to Cyberlife.

It's a sudden change when he finally surfaces from a long and uneventful report with Dream. He was the same as he always was, if maybe a little distant, and Tommy already misses the pale sunlight and the leafy green of the garden and surrounding forest. The light in the elevator is dim, but it does its job, and Tommy slowly takes in the ancient machine.

His eyes, inevitably, land on the open doors and on Wilbur, who is bracketed by entrance, one arm pressed against the doors to keep them from closing. There's a furrow to his brow, and a slight downward tilt to his mouth. "You good?" he asks, eyes lingering on his LED.

Tommy smiles, bright and artificial, to dispel his worries. But if anything, it makes him frown harder. "Yep. All good. Sorry about that."

"Where do you go when you do that?" Wilbur says as he watches Tommy slip past him. He follows, letting the elevator doors slide shut.

The elevator dings behind him, and, through that, he can hear the subtle sound of gears turning as it descends. "What?" he asks. His head feels like it's full of cotton; every sound and sensation is a million miles from him. All that feels real are the last remnants of his conversation with Dream—"I know you'll make me proud, Tommy."—and the feeling of the wind on his skin. "Oh, uh, I was making a report to Cyberlife."

Wilbur stiffens. "About what? Are you snitching on me?" His expression is stuck in a terrible half-smile, like caught it slipping off his face but forced it to remain at the last second; his voice is caught halfway between joking and utterly paranoid.

To that, eyes lingering on the tension in his bones, Tommy can only roll his eyes. "Obviously, they care about what you're doing," he says in his best deadpan. "Mr. Cyberlife, this man—" he pushes out, finger poking Wilbur in the middle of his chest. "—ate a shitty burger and then illegally gambled. Take him away."

The ice breaks, and Wilbur scoffs a little. It's hard not to focus on the way his eyes crinkle as he shoves his hands into his pockets. "Alright, alright, I get it," he relents, shoving his shoulder against the wall as he pushes himself upright. "And, hey, it was betting!"

"All betting is gambling," Tommy says, trailing after Wilbur. The apartment building they've sealed themselves away in is desperately in need of some work. The top floor doesn't look fit for human beings, with walls made of cracked, rotted wood and linoleum floors caked with grime. "You're gambling on how much of an idiot you're gonna be." Tommy sidesteps to avoid a pile of soft down feathers stuck to some long dried substance that his system simply *refuses* to analyze. "Which, in your case, is a fucking lot."

Wilbur's head falls back, and he laughs. When he looks at Tommy next, his eyes are crinkled and warm. "Not much of a fan of it, eh?"

His eyes dart around the wide hallway, taking in the absence of any light sources other than the two doors—with their wide windows—on either end. At some point, they've crossed the invisible line between the inhabited and supposedly uninhabited parts of the building, and he can tell from the sudden drop in the cleanliness. This entire place is a health hazard, and it makes his lip curl involuntarily.

"It *is* illegal."

Wilbur shrugs. His whole body language is relaxed, unfazed. Despite the halls they walk in, and the cracked door they're working towards—in their slow, steady crawl as Tommy takes in

pieces of useless information—Wilbur doesn't care. "It isn't hurting anyone," he says. He reconsiders with a tilt to his head, and then laughs, a puff of air through parted lips. "Except for me, but who cares about that."

Tommy halts in place. He doesn't know what expression twists his face, but he can't help but stare. Wilbur keeps walking, unaware or maybe simply uncaring that there are only one set of soft footsteps against the linoleum. His chest aches, and his head buzzes.

When he catches up to Wilbur, he hovers anxiously over his shoulder. "You shouldn't say shit like that. People care about you."

The look on Wilbur's face is dark. For a single second, Tommy is sure he's going to snap at him, poisonous words slipping from his lips.

But the moment passes, and Wilbur shrugs it off. "What do we know about this guy?"

That familiar heat wells up in his throat until it threatens to choke him. Tommy lets it out in one sharp exhale as they come to a standstill in front of the apartment door. There's paint, dry and cracked, on the front of it. Once upon a time, it may have been the apartment number, lovingly and carefully painted.

But now it's an illegible smear, faded with age and the natural wear of the door.

"Not much. This apartment—" Tommy gestures to it, fingers unwittingly finding a place over the ancient paint. His voice has been reduced to a low mumble, although he doesn't remember making a conscious choice. "—has no tenant. One of the neighbors claimed they saw someone go in." He taps the side of his temple, where his LED blinks. "Someone with an LED hidden under a ratty hat."

Tommy glances to Wilbur. His face is already morphed into sobriety, all traces of paranoia and fond amusement long gone. He'll never stop being amazed at how *easily* he can switch modes from bratty, childish twenty-something to detective.

But, with his signature pen tucked safely behind his ear and his hand easily finding the holster at his hip, Wilbur looks every bit the police lieutenant he is. And despite Schlatt's words echoing in his head, the faintest allusion to whatever bitterness had poisoned their relationship, Tommy is *certain* that there is nobody who deserves this job more.

Because, no matter the deep bruises under his eyes that don't seem to go away, even with sleep, there is no trace of a hangover lingering in his skin. Because, at the end of the day, Wilbur can haul himself from the deep pits of addiction and depression long enough to do a damn fine job.

And, despite himself and the angry buzzing at the base of his skull, Tommy is proud of him.

Androids don't feel things.

Tommy easily batters the thoughts away with an absent hand, too fixed on Wilbur and the way he leans against the door frame. It creaks under his weight.

Wilbur's shirt isn't ripped or stained or dirty in some other way. It's a clean shirt, every wrinkle neatly pressed out of it by Tommy's own hands early this morning. His jacket no longer reeks of faded smoke, but instead, it smells faintly of Wilbur's own laundry detergent; it's the very same smell that encases Tommy and his worn clothes.

Wilbur glances at him, brow once again furrowed in confusion, and Tommy pulls himself together. It won't do either of them any good to linger on Wilbur's progress in the middle of an investigation. An interrogation, possibly, depending on what they find. "If we have to investigate every time someone hears a strange noise," Wilbur quips with a violent eye roll.

"It's not like we were doing anything important," Tommy says. "Besides, we shouldn't turn down any lead, no matter how small."

Wilbur shrugs, but wisely drops it. Instead, he lets his gaze slide between the door and Tommy. A sudden grin overtakes his face. "Why don't you do the honors, rookie?"

Like the drop of a hat, Wilbur's words whisk Tommy away into dangerous thoughts. He slips into some unrestrained fantasy where Tommy was never made on a cold conveyor belt and by desperate, greedy hands, but instead, made the traditional way. The human way.

He thinks of the kind of life he would have, the kind of parents he would have. He thinks about the way he would dream about being in a position to save people; he dreams about preventing all the horrible things in the world, like Jack's death or Niki's abuse or *Stella*. He thinks about rising through the ranks until he was eventually hired and—to the dismay of coworkers who *cared* about him—aired with the grumpy Lieutenant.

And for a brief, distracted moment, Tommy lets his mind linger in that fuzzy dream. He wonders what their relationship would be like if Tommy *was* just some rookie cop, fresh out of the academy and just unlucky enough to wind up with Wilbur as his partner. He wonders how close they could be without the thirium in his veins, that blinding LED on his face.

Tommy winches when the buzzing rips up his artificial spinal cord and finds a home hammering inside his temples, in his eardrums. It keeps increasing, in some kind of sick crescendo until his thoughts are nothing but a white square and numbness radiates through his limbs.

And the deadly orchestra keeps playing until the hazy image of Wilbur, features softened with that crooked smile, with his hand lost in Tommy's unruly curls, fades completely.

"Right," Tommy says, dumbly, when the sensation finally retreats. It doesn't leave—it hasn't, not since the day it first arrived—but it settles back into a low, content buzz. His mouth feels fuzzy and outrageously dry, even though Tommy has never known what it's like to have anything other than a dry mouth.

He steps forward, almost tripping on the section of loose, ripped up flooring. With a series of blinks that clear his blurry vision, he raps his knuckles against the water-softened door.

No sound greets them, other than Wilbur's soft breathing, which sounds ridiculously loud in the silence. Tommy glances at him, but his face is carefully neutral. He tries again, harder,

until his knock rattles the door in its scratched frame. "Anyone home?"

Again, silence is their only answer.

"Open up! Detroit police!"

And in the stillness, Tommy traces the grooves in the door with his eyes, following the natural striations of the grain. He lets his gaze wander to the dull brass door knob hanging, loosely, in its socket.

And then, a massive crash shakes the floor, vibrates through the walls.

Wilbur's face is sharp and angular in the dim light. His hands are already finding his gun, pulling it deftly from its holster. "Stay behind me," he says in a tone that leaves no room for argument. Despite the itch beneath his skin that demands Tommy charge ahead, that he seek his goal with reckless abandon and single-minded determination, he relents. He slips behind Wilbur like a wraith, silent and observant and hovering over his shoulder.

Wilbur rears up, kicking out with his right leg. His shoe catches the perfect spot, right by the worn doorknob, and the rusty lock breaks with a loud crack. The door whips open, banging into the opposite wall with a loud bang. And the duo are greeted with the sight of yet another hallway.

This one is narrow, with two doors on either side and one ominously looming at the very end. There is no light in here, and their shadows obscure that which filters in behind them.

Wilbur stalks forward, feet seeking out the silent boards. He kicks open the door to their left. A cloud of dust explodes with the movement, drifting in the idle light that spills in through the window, but that's it. There's no furniture or decorations. It's just an empty room with rotting floors and a single, pathetic poster drooping off the wall.

The door to the right reveals much the same, save for a broken rocking chair toppled on its side. Wilbur lingers by the last door, nestling up against the right wall. It's the last door left unchecked, and therefore, the one they're looking for.

His breath catches in his chest, although he isn't sure why. They'll either find what they're looking for or they won't. There will either be an android somewhere behind this door, or there won't.

They won't know until they check, though, and maybe that's what makes the entire thing so nerve racking. His thirium pump pounds until it's the only sound he can hear.

Schrodinger's deviant, and all that.

Wilbur waits, generously, until Tommy is positioned beside him, their entire arms pressed together. Then, he cracks through this door, too, and disappears into the room.

And then he promptly swears, sudden and violent, and Tommy's heart drops. He follows without a second thought, hands tightened into balled up fists and knees bent, ever so slightly. But there is no vicious culprit waiting on his haunches to take them down.

Instead, they're greeted with the frantic flapping of dozens of disgruntled pigeons.

They fly everywhere, beaks open to let out indignant squawks and feathers stirring up in the foul breeze they create. The room reeks of the stench of molding wood and of the layers of bird feces coating the floor.

Wilbur gags, pressing his face into the safe haven of his elbow crook.

The birds have settled back down, although their feathers are still ruffled and their tiny bodies heavy with frantic breaths. They strut around haughtily, giving the two *invaders* a wide berth.

"This is—" Wilbur tries, but he's interrupted with yet another vicious gag. "How could anyone live like this?"

Tommy can't even look at the floor without his LED flickering into a panicked yellowed. There are even more feathers there; soft gray down of new hatchlings, and the long, colorful primaries plucked from sickly skin. All of it sticks to the floor with fresh droppings and the remnants of—what his system determines is—bird seed.

And this is just the perfect confirmation to his suspicions. Eyewitnesses are a fickle thing, but a deserted apartment filled with well-fed birds—which act remarkably less skittish around him, with his bright temple—is nothing short of damning. "I imagine it's not an unbearable place. For a deviant on the run, that is."

Beyond the birds and the fucked up flooring, the space—which, after a moment of confused squinting, he determines is supposed to be a kitchen-living room combination—is a mess of broken furniture and dusty, peeling wallpaper. There's a door frame void of any door to the left, and a counter that wraps around the odd curvature of the walls. It's covered with dirt and grime, and Wilbur scowls when he gets too close to it.

The first thing Tommy does to start off the investigation—the first proper thing, besides swat, half-heartedly at some angry birds—is wade through the sea of fluttering pigeons. They chirp, annoyed, with each of his careful steps, but he eventually reaches the other side.

His fingers trace along the top of the stained windows until he finds the lock. It's still in tack, but rusty and sealed shut with age. He stumbles to the other window, the one tucked behind the broken couch—with its shattered legs and the massive rip through its dusty cushions. This one is sealed shut as well and, after a quick glance upwards in which he finds the *massive, jagged hole in the ceiling*, he makes his way towards the doorway in the kitchen.

It turns out to be a bathroom, although it's hard to tell through the general shitiness of it. Tommy ignores it, ignores the pile of dirt and dead leaves in the broken sink, with its jagged pipes, and runs his fingers along this window. This one is locked and untouched, just like the rest, and he feels a breath of relief leave him.

If nothing else, there's no way their deviant left through any window.

"It doesn't *seem* like he's here," Wilbur says, voice muffled through his shirt. He's pulled the collar up and across the bridge of his nose, tucking it under his smudged glasses to keep it in place. The imagery of him—shoulders hunched to keep his shirt in its awkward place—is so ridiculous. He can't quite stop the smile from breaking across his face, despite their dour surroundings.

Tommy steps away from the window and towards Wilbur, intent on tugging on his shirt just to see if his glasses fall off, but he stalls about halfway. The light, which had previously been blocked by his wiry frame, falls, unobscured. It illuminates the far wall, which is covered in a hasty and shaky scrawl. "Wilbur," he breathes, sucking air in through his teeth.

Wilbur follows his gaze, and Tommy can hear the exact moment when he sees it. "*Fuck*." His shirt slips right off, and, confirming his own thoughts, his glasses teeter dangerously.

On the wall opposite to them, the wallpaper is torn away with desperate hands and the word **RA9** is written into the space it leaves blank.

Like Niki's offering, the word spans the entirety of the wall in thin, spidery writing. Unlike Niki's, however, this wall is much larger.

Tommy doesn't register taking careful, measured steps, but when he reaches out, his fingers run along the damp wall. The bottom half of it is tile, but it, like the wallpaper, is patchy and damaged. He traces the shaky writing, and, when he pulls his hand away, the tips of his fingers are stained with black.

"It's still wet," he says when he finally finds his voice. Tommy lowers it, then. Hopefully, their suspect is some outdated model with less than superior hearing. "He's still here."

Wilbur's eyes flicker between the bird-infested chaos and the unnatural stillness of the bathroom. "Are you sure?"

"The windows are all locked shut. The only other entrance is the one we came in." He pauses, taking in the devotion—or the insanity—it must've taken to cover the wall. "I'm sure."

Wilbur nods once, short and jerky. When he turns to leave, to disappear back into the avian mess with the prowl of a predator, Tommy catches his wrist. At his confused, questioning look, he tugs Wilbur closer until he can whisper in his ear. "Act normal. He may think he's got the advantage and get lazy."

Wilbur pulls back, but not out of Tommy's immediate space. His finger's flex around Wilbur's too-thin wrist, and they hold each other's gaze for a long moment.

And then Wilbur is giving him another brisk nod and turning on his heel.

Tommy watches him leave and the chaos that spurs in his hasty footsteps. Then, he turns back to the bathroom.

The sink, which he ignored before out of a desperate attempt at some sort of peace of mind, is the first thing he fixates on. The corner of it is missing, and the sharp, uneven porcelain is

stained with fresh thirium, still visible to the naked eye. The trail splatters across the rim of the sink and into the clogged belly, until Tommy finds a lone LED.

It's been ripped out of the deviant's temple, bits of wiring and plastic skin still attached. It makes something unpleasant lurch in his stomach, but Tommy ignores it in favor of pressing it, gently, between his fingers. The ink still buried in the grooves of his fingerprint smear against it until it, too, is stained black.

Tasting some of the thirium—using fingers not stained by ink—reveals that their mystery droid is a WB200—an agricultural worker—who was reported missing over a week ago. Sorting through the files, Tommy doesn't find any incident reports involving their WB200. He does, however, find a different incident report a few days prior of an android who had to be deactivated.

Bookmarking that for later, Tommy wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. Along with the writing—RA9, written 2471 times, the absolute mad lad—there are several mazes drawn in thick, black lines. He doesn't know what to make of those yet, though, and so he sets that information aside as well.

The most important thing right now is absorbing information. He can always go back and view it later, if necessary.

In front of the wall, there's a recently toppled stool—if the disturbed dust lingering in the air and the tracks in the filth on the floor are being read correctly—and a discarded marker. It's still wet, just like the ink on the walls.

With a quiet breath through parted lips, Tommy reconstructs the scene.

He can picture their mystery WB200 atop that squat stool, marker in hand. He can see the slow drag of it across the tile, across the exposed plaster, and the battered wood. He can hear the squeak of the frantic scribbling.

Like a camera, the vision expands until he's recreated the entire apartment. He can almost picture himself and Wilbur outside the walls, separated through the thin layer of rotten wood. He can feel the vibrations that shook the door; he can hear the noise that echoed through the apartment.

The sketchy image of the deviant startles, slipping off his quickly toppling stool in his haste to *leave*. He could only run towards the sole exit and into that crowded living room.

The image disperses slowly, and Tommy is left in an awkward crouch in front of the graffitied wall.

The living room isn't different when he exits the bathroom, save for Wilbur awkwardly milling about by one of the windows. It's clear, just from the disgust twisting his face, that he desperately wants to pry the lock off and let fresh air flood the room.

But that would give their deviant an escape route, and while Wilbur is sloppy, he isn't stupid. He may play the disinterested role, but it's clear to anyone with eyes that he's fully committed

to their mission.

Tommy stops in front of a wide cabinet that's wedged in the corner next to the doorway. It's missing one of its doors, but the other one is wide open, revealing the evenly spaced shelves. There's a thin plastic card sitting in the middle, and Tommy picks it up. It's an ID for one Rupert Travis, and it's, to his advanced eyes, clearly a forgery. It's a good one, certainly, and he runs his fingers over the smooth plastic.

Wilbur wanders over when he sees Tommy, and Tommy easily hands the ID over. He watches as Wilbur's thumb traces along the thin edge. "A fake?" he mouths with a furrow to his brow. Tommy nods. Wilbur sets the ID back where it came from with a frown.

Further investigation of the room reveals these things: a jacket, an empty but surprisingly clean refrigerator, a box of bird seed that's half-full, and a damaged closet full of more birds.

While the other things are practically useless—more evidence supporting his suspicions, but ultimately unneeded—the jacket *feels* important. It should be much of the same: a dirty suede jacket caked with dirt and smelling of a sewer, rolled into a ball and shoved in some corner. Tommy had been close to disregarding it as something left from a past owner or some other squatter.

But, as he was running his fingers along the mussed collar, he'd found it. The initials RT lovingly, messily stitched with gold thread.

It's such an odd thing to do, such a personal thing. Tommy is still struck dumb by the idea, and his thumb had found a play repeatedly brushing against the awkward stitching. He couldn't imagine any android taking the time to painstakingly sew the initials of a chosen name into some jacket.

Maybe it was something about possession? About being able to point to something and claim it as theirs, to be able to show their initials sewn into the fabric.

The investigation is slowing down, although Tommy is no closer to finding this mysterious Rupert than before. He knows the deviant fled the bathroom, kicking up dust in his hasty wake. And, laying in the middle of a sea of pigeons, is a broken bird cage.

The bottom of it is scrapped to all hell, and the side it's laying on is dented from its landing. The hook that once held it aloft the birds is broken, and Tommy easily finds its other half, still hanging in the ceiling. He gently presses a finger to the frayed edge of the wire.

Based on the fragmentation of the metal—the miniscule particles littering the defiled floor—and the disturbance of the fresher feces, Tommy can determine that the cage fell recently. It would stand to reason, based on the distance it fell and the force of the dent, that its cage crashing to the ground would produce a rather loud sound.

With a hum, Tommy lets himself slip back into that reconstruction headspace. The sketchy image of Rupert bursts forth from the bathroom, hands gripping the door frame in an iron grip. Tommy can see the outline of the birdcage, where it had hung proudly.

Rupert stumbles across the floor and, in his desperate haste to *survive*, slammed the bird cage with his shoulder. The metal wire snapped, sending the thing spiraling to the ground. He watches the explosion of ruffled pigeons and the way their beaks open in their offended squawks.

Cemented back in the real world, Tommy follows the path Rupert left. He finds the skid marks in the filth coating the floor; he can see the way Rupert had instinctively ran for the front door, despite knowing its lack of safety.

Tommy notes the kicked over stool at the foot of a large, fat arm chair, and the skid marks that are consistent, time-wise, with all the others. And, when he inevitably raises his head to look at the jagged hole he noticed earlier, his distracted thoughts coalesce into one frightening whole.

Of fucking course. Rupert is in the goddamn ceiling.

His breath catches in his chest, but Tommy forces himself to remain calm. The first thing he does is lower his gaze and relax his face into something resembling neutrality. He didn't make any realizations about the potential whereabouts of deviant androids. Nope. Not at all.

Tommy instead focuses on the poster on the wall. It's nothing new; after all, Tommy's seen it a million times as he paced the length of the room, eyes seeking out every vital piece of evidence. But now, with his gaze burning to look in the one place he absolutely *cannot*, he sees it.

With a frown, Tommy stumbles his way over. One pigeon pecks at his shoe for his disrespect.

The left upper corner of the poster—advertising Urban Farms, a company only a block away that uses unused rooftops to grow food—is sagging. That in and of itself is nothing. It's an old poster in an old room in an old, forsaken apartment. It means nothing.

But, paired with the disturbances in the general grime on the walls, Tommy determines that the poster has been removed recently. Fingers finding the worn edges, he peels back the poster. And there, tucked away safely in a rough-edged hole in the plaster, is a journal.

The leather is soft but sturdy under his hand, and Tommy carefully thumbs open the pages. It looks handmade, pages too rough and unique to be sold in any shop. If he focuses hard enough, he can see the frayed thread at the base of the spine where unsteady and unpracticed hands had sewn the pages.

Opening it up, he finds page after page of those thick-lined mazes, and, written overtop of it, is some kind of code. After a quick scan, he determines it's a Vigenere cipher, which, with a sigh through clenched teeth, is nearly impossible to solve without knowing the key.

Without looking, Tommy hands the journal over his shoulder. Wilbur takes it from him with a frown. "What's this?"

"A journal of some kind," he says. It takes all of his self-control not to let his eyes flicker towards the gaping hole. "It's written in a cipher, though. I may be able to solve it given time, but..." he trails off with a helpless shrug.

Tommy watches as Wilbur gently turns each page, tongue wetting his cracked lips as he loses himself to his thoughts. And he hesitates, because he has, quite frankly, no fucking idea what to do.

The deviant sits above them, separated only through a thin layer of soggy wood, but Tommy doesn't know how to proceed. Should they pretend to leave, feet slamming noisily against the floorboards while they wait in the hallway only to catch Rupert unaware?

Having Wilbur shoot randomly would only do them harm, he decides with a frown. A gunshot wound—if he was even able to get a shot on Rupert from below—is unlikely to stop an android. It would only damage them, and that wouldn't help them out.

The itch runs below his skin. More than anything, Tommy needs the deviant on a level playing field.

But, before Tommy can come to any sort of conclusion, a solid weight knocks into him, and Rupert's bony knees dig into the soft skin above his artificial ribs.

Havoc consumes the apartment as birds fly everywhere. Wilbur curses violently, throwing his arms up to protect his face from tiny, infectious talons. Tommy doesn't know what was the trigger—his eyes must've lingered too long, or maybe Rupert was tired of hovering above two idiots—but now Rupert's pushing off his chest and slamming, unsteady, against the door frame.

He's gone almost as suddenly as he arrived.

Tommy scrabbles to get up, hands smearing against some of the fresher droppings. He curses, viciously, under his breath and slams through the ajar door. "Try to find a place to cut him off," he says to the room behind him, and he hopes Wilbur got the message. He doesn't linger long enough to make sure.

The front door cracks against his shoulder as Tommy slams into it. It swings open with a shudder, and he uses his grip on the wobbly door knob to propel himself forward.

Rupert doesn't have much of a head start, or, at least, a significant one. As Tommy's eyes find him, silhouetted in the light filtering in through the half-opened door at the end of the hallway, Rupert pulls at something. It's a piece of junk littering the hallway, a tall metal rack shoved against one wall.

The noise it makes reverberates through the floor. Tommy doesn't even slow down as he approaches it, only tucks his legs in as he clears it.

He crashes through the heavy metal door and into the outdoors with a rough puff of air. The light is harsh against the dim indoors he's become accustomed to, and it takes a moment of adjustment that he doesn't have.

Rupert is already across the rooftop, and, as Tommy dawdles in the sunlight peeking out through the grey clouds, the deviant leaps.

The landscape here is interesting. The buildings are pressed so close together that there's barely a foot of space between rooftops. As Tommy follows after Rupert, shoes scraping noisily against the wet concrete, he finds the ledge to only be a few feet high.

His eyes catch on the giant sign a few rooftops away, claiming this, and several more, as property of Urban Farms. And, sure enough, the ground beneath his feet is soggy dirt and tall wheat that brushes against his knees. It sways gently in the wind and with the movement of Tommy's frantic legs as they drag through the tall stalks.

Rupert is leading them towards a building on the opposite side. The edge is too steep, too tall for androids of their caliber. Already, Tommy's system is whirring, picking out possible paths. There are several, but he dismisses most of them. Too many favor safety or balance over speed, and he simply can't have that.

Rupert vaults onto a pile of hay bales hidden under a blue tarp and hauls himself onto the next, and Tommy follows, albeit a few seconds later. The brick is rough underneath his palms, and, for a moment, his feet scrape desperately along the wall until he gets the right leverage to pull.

The wheat field continues, transcending the boundaries of just one roof. Tommy mentally sends his condolences to the plants he's stomping all over, but his mission comes first.

Eventually, they come across a gap that's not so narrow and a building opposite to that gap that's not so short. Rupert doesn't slow down, though, so Tommy doesn't, either. The deviant scales several more hay bales stacked on top of each other and then leaps.

Tommy watches with wide eyes as Rupert scrambles to make it up, his tense fingers the only things stopping him from toppling down an untimely destruction. Tommy falters for a fraction of a second, LED flickering red. It's not Rupert he's seeing, tense forearms shaking as he attempts to pull himself up.

Instead, it's Jack's broken body teetering on the edge. It's Jack's lifeless eyes that he sees as Rupert turns his head to glance, wildly, over his shoulder.

But then Rupert is pulling himself up, toppling gracelessly over the top and disappearing from view.

And Tommy has no choice but to follow. Thankfully, he gets a stronger grip on the ledge and therefore has an easier time hauling himself up. The ground is smooth concrete beneath his shoes, and the difference is audible in the wet slaps that echo in the air.

He catches sight of the end Rupert's jacket as it disappears into the narrow doorway of a long greenhouse, and so he follows. Even from far away, Tommy can see the crowd inside; androids and employees mix together seamlessly, both tending to the small tomato plants that run along either side of the narrow aisle.

Even the doorway is crowded, as two people lean in to watch Rupert's hasty departure.

Tommy knocks through them, shoulders slamming into both of theirs as he follows. He can hear their muttered curses, can see the bewilderment on the faces of the human employees as he races down the aisle.

A crash fills the silence as Rupert throws down yet another metal shelf. Tommy easily vaults over it, although his hand almost slips against the slick metal. He stumbles as he lands, but his feet easily dodge the garden hose coiled in his path.

Breathing curses out through clenched teeth, he bursts out of the greenhouse just in time to watch Rupert sail off the ledge. There is no rooftop waiting to receive him, just a cruel, brick wall.

Despite this, Tommy leaps into the abyss without a second thought.

To his delighted surprise, neither he nor Rupert splatter against the street. Instead, Tommy lands on a slanted glass roof. The pooling water from the recent rain—and gravity—slicks his way, and he slides down. The edge is fast approaching, but, with the sound of shattered glass ringing in his ears, he leaps off and through the shattered window.

Glass crunches under foot, and warnings briefly obscure his vision. He's taken on some damage from the shards of the remaining window, but he can't feel it. The android version of adrenaline—or whatever makes him this numb and shaky, breath coming in harsh pants despite the fact that it's unnecessary—mingles with the thirium in his veins.

Dismissing the warnings—they only serve to distract him, at this point, and his body will heal as it always does—Tommy takes in their surroundings. Rupert takes off between rows and rows of high-tech equipment, housing some plants his sensors don't even try to identify. All he knows is that they're long, leafy, and extraordinarily green.

Their steps echo in the enclosed space as Tommy trails behind. Ahead of them, a wide, garage-type door begins to slide shut. Rupert, if possible, seems to gain speed. At the last second, he drops to the floor and slips right underneath before it shuts completely.

Tommy isn't so lucky.

He slams against the metal door, hissing his discontent through grit teeth for a moment before his system pushes him into action. There's another wide door to the right, and he swivels on his heel to race for it.

The door leads out into a small field with rows of neat lavender growing. The purple is a welcome sight, but so is the sight of Rupert running parallel to him along one of the tall walkways that surround the courtyard.

Tommy follows, leaping over the low bushes of lavender. Damp dust kicks up in his wake until his feet find a metal ramp. He leaps off of it, hands catching on the tall stone wall in front of him. With a grunt, he pulls himself up and over.

He steadies himself against the new roof only to watch Rupert's jacket tail flutter behind him as he disappears off another ledge.

And Tommy does the only thing he can.

He leaps right after him.

This edge leads to yet another slanted glass roof. This one is longer and, as Tommy shifts his body to the left to avoid falling to his destruction, it has many open panels that need to be avoided.

Water seeps into his back, wetting his clothes and sticking them to his skin. And, as Tommy watches intently as Rupert nears the end of the roof with seemingly nowhere to go, he swears, colorfully and violently.

With a horn that echoes throughout the air, a sleek gray train curves out of seemingly nowhere, sticking to the tracks that weave in between the two buildings. Rupert sails off the edge of the roof and lands, with a tense stumble, on *top of a moving train*.

And now it's Tommy's turn to do the very same.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me," he yells, just to do something with the heat and tension building in his chest. He twists into position, feet poised to catch the edge and knees bent. Far too soon, he reaches the end. With all the strength in his body, he kicks out and leaps over the too-wide gap.

The thump of his feet hitting the train is a relief, even if Tommy has to crouch low to the ground to keep on. Everything is so jarringly loud; the noise of the wind tearing through his hair and flicking his own tie into his face, the train as it chugs along the tracks, his own heavy heartbeat. The vibrations of the train travel throughout his entire body.

When he feels steady enough, he stands up into a slightly higher crouch. He moves, one nerve-racking footstep after another until he's steadily creeping towards a stationary Rupert, who's at least fifty feet ahead.

The train rounds a corner, and, without a single second of hesitation, Rupert throws himself at a long metal ladder attached to the side of another Urban Farms building. With another loud curse, Tommy follows.

His hands and feet barely catch the rungs, but he tries not to dwell on the heart-stopping moments where he kicked nothing but air. The rusty metal bites in the soft skin of his palms, but Tommy only focuses on hauling himself up.

When he surfaces, he finds Rupert twisting and ducking under the low branches of an orchard. Tommy follows, even through the oscillating sprinklers peeking up from the ground. His feet land in muddy puddles, sending mud across his shoes and staining the hem of his pants. Droplets splatter across his skin, wetting his hair, and dripping down his face.

Tommy dodges employees, both human and android alike, in his pursuit. He weaves between trees, deftly avoiding the coiling garden hoses strung along the ground. He makes a sharp right when he catches sight of Rupert, standing on the raised edge of the roof, fingers scrambling for the next rooftop.

Tommy chases after him. He barely even breaks his stride as he leaps onto that same edge and then onto the wall, feet braced against the brick as he hauls himself up. His fingertips are bleeding sluggishly through thin, shallow cuts received from the rough stone.

This new rooftop is covered in gravel, which crunches with every long stride. Tommy sprints between rows of dark solar panels and ducks under the doorway of yet another greenhouse. This one, much like that last, is crowded. Androids roam, crowding around the rows of troughs filled with soil and little sprouting plants.

Tommy hunts Rupert with that single-minded determination, hoping back and forth over these troughs to match his prey.

He sprints back out of the greenhouse, which opens up into a field of corn. The stalks are taller than Tommy is, and they're planted so close together. He can't see where Rupert is. He can't see anything other than the rough leaves that cut into the soft skin on his face. All he can do is keep running and hope Rupert hasn't managed to lose him in the chaos.

Tommy brings up an arm to bracket his face. He stumbles, once, on the uneven path. His chest burns.

"Stop right there," Wilbur growls out, a disembodied voice for now as the sharp corn stalks cut into his face. He breaks through just in time to watch Rupert duck and weave around Wilbur's extended gun. And, as Tommy skids to a halt too far away from them, Rupert pushes a rough forearm against Wilbur's chest and pushes him right over the edge.

And Tommy can't breathe, wide and unseeing eyes staring at the space where Wilbur used to be but isn't anymore because a deviant just pushed him over the fucking edge. Because Wilbur was standing there, whole and fine and somehow catching up to them despite all of the fuckery they just did, like the train hopping and roof sliding and what-not.

But then he lets out the shuddering breath that caught, ever so painfully, in his throat. Because Wilbur's fingers, red and scrapped raw against the brick, desperately scratch for purchase until Tommy can see blood.

His system slams into motion, and, in the corner of his vision, a statistic appears. Left unchecked, there's a very high—83%—chance that Wilbur will be able to pull himself up. And the deviant is still there, looking panicked and wild, face twisted in fear, as he makes for another, safer rooftop.

And Tommy—

Tommy *should* be chasing him. He *should* be. It's his mission, after all, and Wilbur, statistically, will be fine. He knows this. He knows.

So why can't he convince himself?

Tommy takes a step forward, yes, but it's in the wrong direction. It isn't towards Rupert and his mission, but towards Wilbur's pained face barely peeking over the edge. When he gets to the ledge, Wilbur takes the offered arm. His fingers are like a furnace against Tommy's skin, and they wrap, ever so tightly, around his forearm.

Tommy pulls and Wilbur tugs, and together, they get Wilbur back up onto the safety of the rooftop. And then, they both collapse into a shivering heap, chests heaving.

The breeze is nice, Tommy can note, faintly. He can feel it even under the heat of Wilbur's lanky, bony body pressing into all the wrong spots. Still, he doesn't try to move, too overwhelmed with relief and the buzzing in his brain.

When Wilbur finally recaptures his breath, he sits bolt upright. His face is twisted with fury, and, after a brief moment of stillness, he slams his fists on the concrete. "God fucking *dammit*," he hisses. He reels back, fists red with the impact, but Tommy catches his wrists before he can do any more damage. "We had him. *We had him.*"

Tommy says nothing. For once, he doesn't know what to say.

When he looks up from Wilbur's bloodied hands, he finds Wilbur watching him. The expression on his face is impossible to read. "You saved me," he says, and Tommy... Tommy doesn't know what to make of that. "If you hadn't... we would've caught that deviant." His voice is oddly strangled, choked with emotion.

Tommy searches his face for anger or betrayal or glee. Anything except for this unreadable, perplexed furrow to his brow and that mysterious glint in his eyes.

"Your life is more important than the mission, Wilbur," he says and means it.

Software Instability: ^

"...Oh," Wilbur says, voice breathless with disbelief. It makes Tommy feel warm and uncomfortable, all at the same time.

"Besides—" Tommy shrugs it off, using the flat of his palm to push himself off the ground. "There will be other deviants."

"Right," he agrees, dumbly. Wilbur reaches out, hesitantly, and his fingers brush along the massive tear in the shoulder of his shirt. The ripped edges are stained with thirium.

Tommy swears. "This was my last outfit," he says, because that feels like the most important thing at this moment. Not the vulnerability softening Wilbur's features or the long disappeared deviant, gone just as soon as he came.

Wilbur's lips twitch, but he, very valiantly, doesn't smile. "You can borrow something of mine," he promises.

Tommy can only nod. The significance of the offer is not lost to him. Wilbur shoves his hands deep into his pockets and wanders towards the rooftop door.

Tommy doesn't move. His eyes are glued to the spot where Rupert disappeared.

“Hey, Tommy?”

He startles and glances over. Wilbur is haloed by the doorframe, hands settled on the wood. For a long, silent moment, it looks like he's going to say something. But then the moment passes as Wilbur shakes it off. “Never mind.”

Relationship with Wilbur: Warm ^

Chapter End Notes

There's more art!!!!!! And its so incredibly good!!!!

<https://twitter.com/cicadabeats/status/1507702360952688643>

oh how the night changes

Chapter Summary

Life goes on. Wilbur and Tommy grow closer

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Eighteen: Oh, How the Night Changes

Wilbur can't exactly place when his feelings about Tommy shifted from disgust and avoidance and burning hatred to... this.

To willingly handing over his favorite pair of sweatpants—the ones without any holes or large stains, because he does have those, *thank you very much*—and a baggy t-shirt.

To accepting Tommy's destroyed shirt without any questions, fingers running along the massive tear and the frayed threads along the edge, and the thirium stain. That part will fade with time—it's already a faint shadow against the stark white fabric—but the rip is large. It could be repaired, by much more dexterous hands than his, but Wilbur isn't sure it's worth it. It's probably better to buy Tommy a whole new shirt.

And, now that he's here, back pressed against the hallway wall opposite the closed bathroom door as he waits for Tommy to change, his mind is lost to dangerous, *foolish* thoughts. Thoughts that he should not, under no uncertain conditions, be thinking about. His mind lingers on the idea of buying Tommy new shirts, yes, but it also favors buying him other things: soft hoodies with large front pockets, baggy sweatpants, lounge wear, even *fucking pajamas*.

Useless, foolish things that androids have no need for, but that humans do.

Somewhere, the sound of a clock ticking fills the silence.

Wilbur doesn't know when he stopped recoiling from Tommy's touch and his pervasive presence. He doesn't know when he stopped viewing his blank, expressionless face as repellent, so personally offensive, and instead as a challenge. An invitation to slide up to his side, arms brushing together with the proximity, and to say some stupid comment on the off chance it will make him smile mechanically.

Or, even better, on the rare occasion that it will make Tommy roll his eyes, scoff, and nudge Wilbur back like they're proper partners and not... whatever it is they are.

The door creaks as it swings open, and with it, Tommy stands in the doorway. He's haloed by the shitty fluorescent lights in the bathroom, and his steps aren't as careful as they usually are. The floorboards groan under his weight.

The sweatpants are just shy of perfect. Wilbur is taller than him, after all, and if it weren't for Tommy's intervention, the pants would've brushed the floor. Instead, the cuffs, fabric bunched up and folded in on itself, barely brush the top of his socked feet. The t-shirt is as ill-fitting as it is on Wilbur, and yet, it looks better on Tommy.

He looks soft. All the hard edges of an android and a detective and a ruthless machine designed to hunt down his own kind have been worn down. It leaves him with only his most basest instincts, like listening to music or forcing Wilbur to eat, especially when doesn't feel like it.

In Wilbur's ratty old t-shirt and baggy sweatpants, with his golden hair frizzy and curling from dampness, face illuminated by the warring lights of the bathroom and the hallway, he just looks like...

Like Tommy.

And Wilbur doesn't know what to do with that information. He doesn't like the way it constricts his throat and sits, heavy and pressing, on his chest. He doesn't like the way it makes his heart pound in his chest, or how it fuels the impossible itch in his skin to reach out, fingers brushing through the damp hairs at the base of Tommy's neck.

Tommy spreads his arms out and does a slow twirl. "Well?" he says, and he almost sounds nervous. As if he cares about what Wilbur thinks of him. As if he's *capable* of that.

Wilbur can't look at him. Not when he looks this soft and *domestic*. Not when it makes him feel like they're something they're not. Closer than they are. "It's alright," he says, roughly, fingers picking at the frayed edges of Tommy's old shirt. He holds it up, then, with a sudden fervor. It's a desperate distraction. His ratty, torn savior. "I think your shirt is pretty much fucked."

Tommy's eyes track the movement. He shrugs, unbothered, but his hands automatically reach out for the fabric scraps. "That's fine. I'll contact Cyberlife for another uniform." He holds the shirt gently, with a kind of reverence, and then, suddenly, he balls it up into a crumpled heap.

Neither of them move, their bodies crowding the narrow hallway. Wilbur's gaze remains locked on the shirt clenched in Tommy's clawed fingers.

This is the natural conclusion to their conversation. Wilbur has said his piece, and Tommy is, and neither of them have anything more to add. This is the time where they would usually part with awkward goodbyes and go their separate ways.

Wilbur would retreat back into his room—his cave—and Tommy would return to the couch. Wilbur would do whatever it was that he usually did—mope around, mostly, although sometimes he broke up the monotony with funny cat videos—and Tommy would do whatever he saw fit. Listen to music, probably, or sink into that weird trance thing he did. Sleep mode, or whatever Niki had called it.

No matter how close they get, no matter how well they work together, they aren't *friends*. Tommy is an android, made of computer code and plastic and false pleasantries, despite how prickly he's becoming. No matter how lifelike he is or how human he acts, he simply... isn't.

The thought stings more than it should, but Wilbur is fine with that. The dull ache in his chest doesn't *matter* because it's fine. It really is.

Wilbur lingers, though, eyes tracing the small nicks and scratches that litter his own hands from pulling himself up from the jaws of death. And maybe he should be a bit more focused on that part of it all—the part where he was knocked off a building by a volatile deviant, feet scrambling in open air for a few terrifying seconds—but he's not.

Because, at the end of the day, all he gained was the red-rimmed, angry marks on his hands and the realization that Tommy *cares*. Well, not really, because only faulty androids are capable of feeling things, or at least deluding themselves into it, and Tommy, for all his mechanical grins, is not faulty.

But an android designed for a single purpose, a single mission driving his every interaction, had prioritized the life of a silly human. Wilbur doesn't know what it means, but surely—*surely*—it must mean something.

So Wilbur lingers in the hallway, because he's bad at recognizing his own emotions and even worse at putting them into words. He never thanked Tommy for what he did, for all that he sacrificed, and he's acutely aware of that with every passing second. But he doesn't know how to repay him without making it abundantly clear that he's realizing the foolishness of his past actions. That he's, somehow, impossibly, warming up to the idea of androids.

Later, he'll blame all his bad decisions on the warm feeling diffusing through his veins, making him drunk on happiness and *affection*.

Tommy breaks away from their impromptu stand off first, steps once again light on the floor, avoidant of the creaky boards. The sight of his retreat makes him panic, and so, he opens his mouth without consulting his brain.

“So uh, what do you have planned?” Wilbur asks. His voice is low, but somehow far too loud against the silence of the house.

Tommy pauses and half-turns his body towards Wilbur. His expression is furrowed, and he tilts his head like a confused puppy. “Don't we have the rest of the day off?”

The question burns him, and he can feel the heat already claiming his ears. Wilbur rubs at one half-heartedly, as if his massaging fingers will magically make the red disappear. “No, yeah,

we do.” He swallows around the lump in his throat. “Uh, I just meant... you know, in general. Non-work... related.”

Tommy stares. Wilbur stares back. The silence consumes them.

Eventually, Tommy’s brows raise. His LED blinks yellow just once. “I don’t know,” he says, turning his body fully into the conversation. “Maybe just... playing some more music? And sorting through the information we gathered today.”

Wilbur nods a little too frantically. “Cool, cool.”

Tommy stares. “Did you— What are you going to do?”

“Oh, nothing much,” he shrugs, shoving his hands into the tight pockets of his jeans. It’s a motion that is simultaneously nonchalant and all too forced. He waits for too long; it’s an awkward, silent beat in the conversation. And then, like the smooth, confident, and smart guy he is, he blurts. “Do you want to maybe—“ his voice cracks. “—watch TV or something?”

Silence. A bead of sweat forms at the base of Wilbur’s neck, and it disappears down his shirt. He thinks, belatedly, of Tommy on the other side of his door, and of his voice spilling over the silence like warm honey.

“We can watch Up, if you want?”

That seems to jolt Tommy out of whatever stasis had temporarily trapped him. His eyes light up, and he smiles. It’s almost like there’s feeling behind it. “You want to—*Really?*”

And fuck him sideways, but Wilbur smiles, softly. *Fondly*, some might call it. “Sure, man. It’s been a while since I’ve seen it. I’ll make some popcorn.”

With that, they separate, albeit briefly.

Wilbur throws a bag of shitty, microwave popcorn—that’s been sitting in his cupboard for god knows how long—and Tommy settles in on the couch, remote in hand. And when Wilbur eventually joins him, he doesn’t press himself into the corner of the arm, as far away as possible.

He simply sits, and, if their arms brush occasionally, then so be it.

Life goes on. And, slowly but surely, they build up a routine.

Wilbur wakes up every day at a reasonable time. Sometimes, it’s with a stiffness in his shoulders and an ache behind his eyes. But sometimes, he feels pleasantly rested, and the bags underneath his eyes seem lighter, on those days.

On good days, where Wilbur doesn't feel so weighed down with crushing disappointment of his own existence, he makes a small breakfast for himself. It's nothing complicated or special, but to him—who has barely had the energy to eat, let alone cook—it *feels* special.

One day, he makes some scrambled eggs and toast. He's more pleased that he even remembered how to, but Tommy—embarrassingly—tells him how proud he is and gives him a solid pat on the shoulder.

On most days, he at least manages to eat a small snack—usually prepared by Tommy, although nothing that he cooked—often hunched over the kitchen sink like some kind of gremlin.

On all days, even the bad ones, Wilbur drinks at least one glass of water under Tommy's watchful glare. The amount differs, based solely on when Tommy's expression lets up, until the stern stare breaks into a smile.

And then, they go to work.

Tommy stills totes around in borrowed clothes. No matter their resolve, Wilbur had been too lazy to take him shopping, and Cyberlife is taking their sweet, sweet time sending that new uniform. As a result, they resolved themselves against the odd stares from coworkers.

It's unusual for any android to be out in public wearing regular clothes, and the ones that do—companion androids, most commonly—usually aren't recognized as androids. Without LEDS embedded in their foreheads and clothes littered with android markings, they're almost indistinguishable from humans. That's one, amongst many, of the things that make them so terrifying.

To Wilbur's coworkers, who know him or know of him, seeing an android walk at his side, dressed in his uniform pants and one of Wilbur's old dress shirts must be a sight to behold.

And behold it they do, with gaping mouths and wide, alarmed eyes.

The adjustment period takes a while, but the stares lose their novelty after the first hour. People keep staring, although after a while, they at least *attempt* to hide that and their incessant whispering behind their hands.

For someone who loudly proclaims a hatred of androids and proudly displays a desk littered with anti-android paraphernalia, it certainly must be an odd sight to see.

Although, after that first day, Wilbur does end up tearing off all the anti-android shit from his personal space in a fit of frustration. Tommy hadn't seen any of his fit, disappeared to either bring Wilbur yet another snack or to chat with Niki. He doesn't say anything when he returns, either, although he had smiled softly.

Wilbur doesn't regret it, even though his ears had burned for hours. After all, it was in poor taste, and he can't imagine how it must feel to sit adjacent to that shit every single day.

The only ones unfazed by this development are Quackity and Charlie, who, after several boisterous comments, start showering Tommy with old clothes and other accessories. Quackity, with an absolutely shit eating grin splitting his face, even declared Tommy his own personal dress up doll.

Despite his insistence, they don't end up having any fashion shows in the men's bathroom, although Tommy did slip on a pair of suspenders Charlie had gifted him with a small smile.

They suited him surprisingly well.

So much so that Wilbur mentally added suspenders to the ever growing list of things to buy Tommy.

Cases keep rolling in, but nothing as important as Rupert's case. Neither of them are even convinced that the new cases are related to deviancy. After all, a person can only interview so many old ladies claiming their androids walked off on their own while simultaneously pondering the location of the glasses perched on the tops of their heads.

No new information is added to their case, and Wilbur declares a refusal to take those kinds of complainants when one woman—who had batted her mascara-clumped eyelashes at him the entire time—pinched his butt sharply as they left.

Life goes on, although Wilbur does regret that he doesn't get the chance to talk to Niki, aside from short conversations when he passed her on the way to the kitchen. She seems to only grow more restless, fingers always drumming against the wall or frantically braiding a strand of long hair.

He wants to stay for longer; she finally stopped staring at him with such carefully concealed resentment after their last conversation, and he can't help but feel that he's growing on her like an unwanted fungus.

If the opportunity didn't arise soon, then he would make one.

The bad days don't just go away.

Of course they don't. Having someone in his house—as gentle and soothing as the presence turned out to be—doesn't fix years of deeply ingrained habits and flawed—read *non-existent*—coping mechanisms. It doesn't fix the unresolved of a childhood filled with bad foster homes and of unhealthy competition with his brother.

And it sure doesn't magically make his depression disappear with a puff of smoke and an explosion of shitty glitter.

But they do get better.

Before, he'd lay in bed all day, consumed with a bone weary exhaustion that made getting up an impossible task. The lights stayed off, both because of the permanent headaches that pounded at his temples and because of his inability to *get up*, even for the most—seemingly—simple things.

He would lay in his bed from the time he unfortunately awoke, hale and healthy, ignoring the cramping in his gut and his own brain battering itself with the violence of his own thoughts. Sunlight streamed in through gossamer curtains, and he'd watch how it would stretch and crawl across the floor with the passage of time.

If he felt up to it, maybe he would dig around in the pile of dirty clothes that made up his floor until he unearthed his laptop to watch shitty home renovation shows.

But now, ever since that first fateful day where Tommy pressed himself against the other side of his door, that damned android has made it his mission to single handedly pull Wilbur out of whatever depressive spiral he's lost himself to.

More often than not, that manifested in trying to coax him out with whatever inane methods he's chosen that day. On one memorable occasion, Tommy had poured water from cup to cup in a perplexing—and strangely effective—attempt to force Wilbur to go to the bathroom.

If nothing else, even if Wilbur was able to stifle the urge to laugh, his actions brought a levity to the situation that he so desperately needed.

Occasionally, Tommy would blast shitty music through the walls or put on an episode of some trashy reality show. Wilbur never would figure out if the trash reality show was supposed to make him get up just to turn it off or to encourage him to come watch.

But Tommy's commentary paired with his somehow genuine gasps of horror and delight made Wilbur press his smile into his pillow.

Despite it all, Tommy always, *always* talked. He'd fill the air with meaningless chatter and unnecessary commentary until Wilbur eventually crawled out of his pit of a room. And when he did, he always, *always* smiled and went about the rest of their day like nothing ever happened.

His bed feels too lump underneath his prone body, and there's headache throbbing behind his eyes and along the base of his skull. He's been laying down for far too long; his mouth is fuzzy and dry, and his body aches with the simplest of needs. His tongue keeps sticking to the roof of his mouth.

Wilbur kicked his blanket off his bed long ago, in a fit of sweaty exhaustion, and he's regretting it now. Despite his searching hands combing through every scrap of cloth they came across, Wilbur can't find it again. Instead, he curls up in a pathetic little ball on top of his sweat-damp sheets, bony knees pressed flat against his chest.

A sudden knock at the door reverberates through the walls, through his bed, through his throbbing skull. Wilbur winces, awkwardly tugging his pillow until it lays over his head.

“Wilbur?” Tommy calls out softly.

Wilbur peels open his stuck-shut eyelids, sticky with tears and sleep crust. If he squints, vision blurred in the absence of the glasses usually perched on the bridge of his nose, he can just make out the white of Tommy’s socks underneath the crack in the door. “You alive in there?”

Wilbur grunts in acknowledgement. The pillow over his face is still miraculously cool, and it blocks out the sunlight streaming in.

“That’s good,” Tommy says. The craziest part is that he means it. Or at least, Wilbur thinks he does. As much as an android incapable of feeling anything can. There’s a certain relief wavering his voice, just the faintest bit.

The house falls silent, and Wilbur strains his ears to hear the tell-tale thumps of Tommy settling down on the other side of the door.

He hears nothing, though, even when he pulls the pillow away from his ears. Nothing but silence and the sound of his own shallow breaths.

“I’ve got some water out here,” Tommy says, like he always does. It’s one of the first comments he makes; a gentle reminder that even if Wilbur refuses to take care of himself, then someone will. It makes Wilbur’s heart clench, and he curls up tighter around his shivering body. “And some apples we had left over.”

A pause.

Wilbur shifts, slipping a hand underneath his head. His fingers curl tightly into damp locks and press against his sweaty scalp.

“They’re a little—“ Tommy huffs. Laughter, or at least Wilbur thinks it’s supposed to be. Lately, he’s been doing this half-laugh, half-exhale thing whenever Wilbur or Quackity—and Charlie, on one notable occasion—say something funny. “A little meely, maybe, but still edible. We’ll have to go shopping soon. It looks a little sparse in there.”

Despite the dull roar of pain in his blood and the distracting, aching pit in his chest, Wilbur doesn’t miss it. *‘We’*.

At some point, some indistinguishable point, Tommy shifted from saying ‘you’ to ‘we’. As if it’s equally important for him to get groceries. As if those apples also belong to him. As if he’s a part of this household, inherently and automatically grouped together with Wilbur.

“—of asking George to implement some of the code from, say, an AX400, so that I can have the ability to cook,” Tommy is saying, feet shuffling against the wooden boards. “Although I’m not sure how much he would appreciate that, considering—“

He feels so far away. There isn’t that much separating them: just a thin plaster wall and a door that rattles on its rusted hinges. And Wilbur knows—he knows—that if he asked, Tommy would cross that distance.

There's something so terribly intimate about this level of vulnerability. The thought of it, of *anyone* seeing him in this state—half fetal, face scrunched up with pain, and with the weight of the world and his own expectations—makes his skin crawl. Not even his own family was privy to this, not if he could help it.

But he's so tired of being alone. He's so tired of trying to drag a body whose limbs wouldn't fucking move.

He wanted to be loved, to be taken care of. He wanted to let go of the rope, to drop through the sky, and trust other people to catch him before he hit the ground. It was terrifying, that kind of trust, but he craved it like a needle in his skin. Like a shot of whiskey burning his throat.

Before he can think too much about it, Wilbur props himself up on shaking arms, and says, his voice cracked and torn and scratching against his raw throat, "You can come in."

The silence that follows is deafening. It's nerve-racking, and blood rushes through his ears. Goosebumps break out along his arms, and he rubs them against his warm sheets. "If you want to."

His breath catches painfully in his throat. There's a pressure behind his eyes, but he's had no water today. No tears form, although he turns his head until his forehead and face are buried in the mattress.

Maybe if he presses hard enough, he'll be able to smother himself. It would certainly be better than dwelling in the painful silence of rejection, ears glowing red with his embarrassment.

But then the door cracks open, slowly swinging open with a noisy creek.

And Wilbur glances up.

Tommy stands in the doorway, ringed with golden light from the hallway. True to his word, there's a glass clenched tightly in one hand and a plate of sliced apples in the other.

He looks soft. His hair is more frizzy than usual, sticking up with sleep in odd ways. He's still wearing Wilbur's sweatpants, but now it's paired with one of his older, softer hoodies.

He looks entirely too domestic, and Wilbur's heart clenches painfully at the sight.

Their eyes lock. A myriad of expressions pass over Tommy's face, all too quick to identify, but he settles on a furrowed brow and a slight uptick to his lips. He hesitates for a long moment, eyes drawn to the invisible line at the door.

Then, he crosses the barrier.

Tommy steps in like an astronaut taking their first steps on a new planet; with far too much reverence and cautiousness, and with slow, sure steps. He wades through the sea of clothing littering the floor until he makes it to Wilbur's wobbly bedside table on the opposite side of the bed.

Nudging the collection of empty cups aside with a gentle hand, he places the new one—commercial and with a single drop of water running down its clear side—and the plate.

Coming back around his bed, Tommy finally looks at him properly. His eyes no longer sweep around the room like a starved man taking in the sight of food, committing this forbidden place to memory. His expression softens when Tommy sees him. “Oh, Wilbur,” he says, too soft and too *pitying* for his liking.

Wilbur makes a disgruntled noise and presses his face back under the pillow. His ears burn with shame, and yet, despite his body tensed under Tommy’s critical eye, he doesn’t boot him out.

He wants to regret it. He wants to crawl into the floor and disappear, to scrub Tommy’s memory of this moment of foolishness, of weakness and misplaced vulnerability.

But he doesn’t. Despite the shame singeing him, he can’t find it within him to regret it.

Wilbur jolts when his thick duvet lands on him. It’s cool from its time on the ground, but still soft, and he easily tucks it around his body. Poking his head out from underneath the pillow, he watches Tommy’s back as he settles on the ground directly in front of him.

“I, uh, I also brought these,” Tommy says in a quiet voice. Something about Wilbur’s room, as dim and silent as it is, must inspire stillness. From the large pocket of Wilbur’s borrowed pants, Tommy pulls out a small bottle of Advil.

With greedy hands, Wilbur snatches it, fingers running along the edges of the cap. He doesn’t feel like sitting up to swallow a pill, so he contents himself just holding the bottle between perpetually cold hands.

Then, he returns his focus to Tommy.

His chosen spot, with his back pressed against the base of Wilbur’s bed, has landed him right in the single sliver of sunlight, and it illuminates the gold on his head.

Wilbur is mesmerized by the glow of it, and, without his conscious decision or consent, his hand wanders over. He doesn’t touch Tommy; he has enough awareness or self-control not to do that. But his hand does hover above his tangled curls, fingers twitching with the urge.

“It never used to look like that,” Wilbur says. His voice is thick with sleep and disuse, and he scrunches up his nose when he gets a whiff of his own breath. Tommy, for his part, doesn’t even turn his head to look at him. He does, however, hum in confusion. “Your hair.”

It’s like a flickering candlelight in the darkness, or a solitary lighthouse on a tall rock. It’s a warm fire on a cold day, universal in its allure and its draw. Wilbur’s hand shakes, and the resulting motion has the prickly ends of individual strands brushing against his skin. He wants, so badly, to bury his hand in gold and comb through the mess.

He doesn’t understand the desire—not the least bit—but he aches with it, teeth biting into his bottom lip. The tension tightens all the muscles of his body.

With air trapped in his lungs, caught, painfully, in his throat, Wilbur gives in.

Wilbur feels more than sees the tension that sweeps through Tommy in a wave, as Wilbur fingers sink into his hair. He feels how he stiffens, and he hears the confused noise that slips past his lips.

Wilbur pulls his hand back and waits for a beat.

Tommy doesn't say anything. He doesn't scoot away from Wilbur with disgust and confusion. He doesn't move at all, body frozen and stiff with tension.

After another, silent moment, Wilbur slowly slips his hand back into his hair.

It doesn't feel like a cheap wig, like Wilbur might've thought. His hair feels as real as Wilbur's does, albeit silkier, like it's just been washed. The curls tangle and knot around his fingers, just like real hair would. But, as he settles his rough palm against the base of Tommy's scalp, it doesn't radiate heat.

"What do you mean?" Tommy asks after a long delay, voice careful and tense.

On some long buried instinct, Wilbur scratches his nails against Tommy's scalp. His noise of confused approval vibrates through his outstretched arm, and his head lolls back into the touch.

Wilbur smiles, softly. "It wasn't curly in the beginning." And it wasn't. It was straighter, slicked back and tamed into something resembling professional. He runs his fingers through his hair, pausing and gentle, untangling when the strands catch.

Again, it takes a moment for Tommy to reply. His head seems to weigh a ton, drooping back towards Wilbur. He doesn't resist, and the back of his head hits Wilbur's mattress.

His expression is mixed. His eyes are lightly closed, his face relaxed, save for the confused gape to his mouth, and his LED circles a steady yellow. Almost instinctively, Wilbur is drawn to the golden light. He watches as it spins, and, after a long moment of internal warring and hesitation, his thumb traces along it.

It's an odd feeling. The LED is contrasted against the skin it's embedded in, smooth plastic interrupting what feels like normal, human skin. Wilbur pauses, and then brushes his thumb over it again. This time, he leaves it gently pressed over the light.

Tommy hums and tilts his head into the touch. It leaves Wilbur's fingers brushing the baby fat still on his cheeks. "I think it used to be straighter," he agrees, softly. Distantly. "Dunno what happened. Think my system decided to make it curlier. Didn't choose to."

Wilbur makes an acknowledging noise. He shifts forward, and the movement upsets the bottle of pills with a noisy rattle.

It's like a drug. Despite the lack of warmth beneath his hands reminding him of life, he can feel the faint buzzing of Tommy's system, like electricity humming.

The fingers of his free hand trace along the edges of Tommy's hair line, pulling the fringe back from his large forehead. Tommy makes an odd sort of whining noise, tilting his head back up until Wilbur's fingers brush along his scalp again. With a fond huff of exasperation, he scratches his nails along his skin.

"That's weird," he says. His thumb brushes along the LED absent-mindedly, as if trying to wipe away a stubborn smear. "You're weird."

Tommy makes a sound of acknowledgment, deep in his throat.

As Wilbur watches, the skin underneath the pad of his thumb disappears in that shimmery way he's seen Niki do before. He sucks in a quiet breath, shifting forward until he can see better. It's a small patch of bone white plastic, a circle that extends just outside his LED.

Finger hovering over it, he eventually brushes over it. It's smooth and slippery. Tommy doesn't have any reaction when he touches it, but, without the extra layer between them, he can feel the humming even more acutely. It sends vibrations up through his arm.

No matter what, Wilbur can't take his eyes away from it.

"It kinda looks like yours, now," Tommy mumbles, and Wilbur's heart slams into his chest until he realizes he's just continuing the conversation from before. Tommy's eyes are still shut; he's either unaware, or uncaring, of the patch of missing skin.

Wilbur doesn't know what it means—if it means anything and wasn't just some malfunction—but he reluctantly removes his thumb. After a moment, the skin shimmers back into place.

"Oh, yeah?"

Tommy hums. "Yeah." Wilbur drags his hand through his air, scratching at the base of his skull. "It almost looks like we could be brothers."

The air stills in his chest; his hand unintentionally clenches in Tommy's hair.

No noise fills the air, except for the frantic pounding of his heart, so loud that it must be audible to Tommy. "*Oh*," he breathes, swallowing the lump in his throat. That sharp tension is back behind his eyes, and he desperately wants to cry.

Instead, he pulls away from Tommy—who makes a soft noise like a confused kitten—and buries his face in his crumpled pillow.

"Hello," Wilbur says once the door swings shut, lock clicking into place behind him. It's been a while since he's been in the interrogation room, with its headache-inducing lights and its sterile, sleek surfaces. He knows Tommy's all but forgotten about it, choosing instead to sit on the floor in front of Niki's cell.

Maybe it's better that way. Maybe Niki prefers not to have every single interaction tainted by the grim reminder that she is, first and foremost, their sole connection to the unexplored deviancy. That she is, above any other identifier, their informant.

That's nice and all, but Wilbur actually needs to be able to interact with her, and he feels much better about his chances in the familiar interrogation room than locking himself in her cell.

Niki eyes him with a neutral regard. There's that, at least. Her stares have upgraded from 'I-can-and-will-kill-you' to 'you-are-barely-worth-my-excessive-amount-of-free-time'. It's a little pathetic, but Wilbur's willing to take whatever he gets.

Her legs are brought up to the seat of the chair, crossed under her with her elbows digging into the soft skin of the side of her knees. Her hair is looking more tangled than usual, tossed to one side of her head carelessly.

"Hello," she greets back after a long assessing moment.

Wilbur pulls back the metal chair and winces at its familiar screech. He settles down across from her, and, as he takes to fiddling with the sleeves of his worn coat, he tries to ignore the way her eyes track his every movement.

It's natural for her to be suspicious of him. He's one of the detectives on her useless, futile case. But, even more than that, he's *human*. He is everything she's fighting against, and everything that is holding her back.

But he's hoping to change that, no matter how slow that process is. Much like Niki, he has plenty of time on his hands.

"What do you have planned for me today, Lieutenant Soot?" she asks, some kind of jest or mockery in her tone. It's always been hard to read her, with her careful expressions and planned behavior. He's not like Tommy; his sharp eyes aren't able to find the slightest, minuscule tick in her face.

His hand wanders into one of the massive pockets of his coat, and he digs around until he finds the deck of cards he stored there earlier. The cardboard casing is soft and worn from years of use and dozens of oily fingers rubbing against it.

"Nothing difficult, I assure you." He pulls out the deck of cards, but doesn't yet raise it above the table. Niki's eyes track the movement of his arm, and she stiffens. "In fact, it's not even case related." Wilbur sets the deck, softly, on the table between them.

Instantly, Niki relaxes. "Cards?" she asks and raises a single brow.

Wilbur grins. "Cards," he agrees as he slides the cards—some bent or creased from misuse, and many with odd stains marring their faces—out of their little box. "Ever played competitive solitaire before?"

Niki shakes her head. Her expression is still wary, warped in suspicion and confusion. But, beneath it all, beneath the mask she so carefully slides in place, he can see a glint of something behind her eyes. An excitement, of sorts.

And maybe she's just so bored that she'd rather do anything else than sit in that cell for another minute. Wilbur is willing to take whatever she's willing to give.

After all, they have all the time in the world.

The TV casts a dim glow on their faces, the only light in the room save for the warm glow coming from the hallway. Wilbur is pressed into the arm of the couch, elbow aching against it as he props up his chin with an idle hand. Everything is quiet and still and unbearably sleepy.

On the other side of the couch, Tommy is silent, enraptured by the nature documentary they've got on. He'd put up a good fight for Up—and fuck him, but the arguments were *compelling*—but in the end, they'd compromised. The noise of it, the soft sounds of nature and birds chirping out mating songs, fills their home.

Legs crossed underneath him, Wilbur balances a mug of lukewarm hot chocolate on his knee. It snowed today, the first snow of the season. Tommy had, honest to god, *beamed* when he caught a glimpse of it outside Phil's office window. And, despite the relatively informal meeting, he had shoved himself against the glass to watch as it drifted down.

Nothing had stuck, other than a damp frost along the withering blades of grass, but Tommy had still spun around like a madman in the bitter wind, given the first opportunity.

First snows called for hot chocolate, as the mug warming his skin could attest to. It had hurt to find only one mug sitting on the counter, and his usual cup had looked lonely without its young companion. Wilbur had, stupidly, offered some to Tommy, but neither of them felt too confident about letting him ingest things other than blood or thirium.

Here, tucked under a blanket shared between two people—despite the fact that Tommy doesn't *really* need a blanket tossed over his lap—and surrounded by the night, he can allow himself to revel in his own vulnerability.

Because Wilbur *likes* this.

He likes that the oppressive, overbearing silence of his house is slowly being consumed by noise again. Like nature reclaiming old, abandoned buildings, ivy crawling between the cracks left by humanity. He likes having someone in his home, building a steady routine until they easily dance out of each other's ways while getting ready in the morning.

It's been so long since he's had someone near him. Someone who wasn't around during the darkest days. Someone who hasn't been tainted by the past, soiled with months of bitter fighting and desperation.

He likes being able to sit on the couch with someone, knees brushing together occasionally.

Wilbur nestles further into the too-soft cushions. He's warm and content, fondness buzzing through his veins. It's been a long day of useless paperwork, and seeing the first signs of the upcoming winter brought up a mixture of strong emotions. His thumb brushes along the smooth ceramic of his mug, but, before he can fall down that rabbit hole, a soft pressure against his shoulder startles him.

Tommy is slumped against him, face slack with something resembling sleep. His LED blinks a faint, serene blue, and his mouth is parted, ever so slightly.

Wilbur stills, consumed by the fear that the slightest movement will disrupt him.

But Tommy doesn't wake. His chest moves with air passing through, and his fingers—which are lost beneath the too-large sleeves of the sweatshirt Wilbur had more permanently lent him—clench around the ratty fabric of his shirt.

“Tommy?” Wilbur asks in a whisper.

Tommy makes a disgruntled noise and shifts, burying his face further into Wilbur's shoulder.

Wilbur can't help the soft smile that overtakes his face. He wouldn't be able to stop it even if he wanted to.

Curling a hand around the side of his head, thumb brushing over his LED again, he's struck by how human Tommy looks. Like that, face slack with sleep and looking younger for it, he could be any other college kid.

With a sigh, Wilbur lets his hand slide away and into the short curls at the base of his skull. Unobstructed once again, his LED illuminates his pale face.

Tommy shifts again, wiggling and worming until he's pressed flush against Wilbur's side.

And, with his heart pounding a frantic beat against his ribcage, Wilbur presses his temple against the crown of Tommy's head. His eyes flutter closed with the final image of two birds, feathers puffed up for warmth, nestling together in the dead of night.

Chapter End Notes

Wilbur POV!!!! It's been a while since we've been in this depressed head, but I'm glad to be back. Can you tell how much I love writing him? Because I adore it <3 It was a fun chapter to write :)

This is literally all fluff, but you know what? You guys deserve it :D I'm totally not compensating for the absolute shit show that the next chapter (or maybe its the one after that ;}) will be. But in all honesty, I'm really really excited for the next two chapters!!!

If y'all don't know, you can follow me on twitter (@NymphiiWrites). I post updates on chapters, and retweet all the incredible art that's been made :) And if you do happen to make any art for this fic, just know I will eternally be indebted to you /j

the patron saint of broken things

Chapter Summary

Tommy and Wilbur investigate an unusual case, which brings up unusual feelings...

Chapter Notes

TW: mentions/implications of sexual assault (it's a sex club, and the androids don't exactly give consent), vomit, suicide ideation/attempt, strangulation, death in general, and almost a glorification of death?

Please be careful with this one!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Chapter Nineteen: The Patron Saint of Broken Things

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November 8th, 2038

9:43 PM

The house is dark when Tommy gets back, a single point of darkness on a street otherwise illuminated by the warm light filtering out through gauzy curtains and in thin slivers where they don't meet. The driveway is nothing but a pale, bumpy strip on the ground, and the trash can, sitting innocuously on the curb, is nothing but a shapeless, dark mass.

There are no signs of life. At least, not from the outside. There's no sound of movement or music shaking the thin walls, even to his advanced hearing.

It's not *impossible* that Wilbur has already gone to bed. But it is very unlikely, and the silence and stillness have his steps quickening against the dew-covered grass.

Wilbur and Tommy had parted earlier that evening when George had shown up, his usual toolbox tucked carefully under his arm. He'd claimed it was routine maintenance, one of the regular check-ups he had mentioned when first leasing Tommy out. But, when he later pulled Tommy aside into one of the empty storage closets to do maintenance uninterrupted, he had riddled him with questions about Wilbur and the investigation.

At that moment though, Wilbur had shot Tommy a questioning look, conveying with silence and with the slight raise to his brows what words he didn't even need to say. It was a heady rush, and it always came as a surprise, no matter how often they were starting to communicate non-verbally.

Tommy, in the end, had waved him on. Wilbur left with only one last pointed look, a brush of his hand against Tommy's shoulder, and a very soft 'see you later.'

The check-up had gone as expected, no matter the increasingly pointed questions. Although, George *did* make a lot of pinched faces behind the palm pressed to his mouth. Tommy can only assume they were in reference to the myriad of instances where his software was unstable.

At one point, carefully scrolling through Tommy's data on the sleek laptop he carted around, George made a pleased hum and nodded decisively. Tommy had wracked his brain for what that could possibly be in reference to—and still thinks about it occasionally, a brief flicker of his thoughts back towards the ridiculous amount of data crowding his mind—but had ultimately come up with nothing.

The wind is cool against the exposed nape of his neck, but not biting so. Most of the leaves have already fallen, swept up by incessant breezes or neighbors' pointy rakes, and the wind rattles through bare branches.

It's only been an hour or so since they've been separated, but Tommy, embarrassingly so, has gotten used to Wilbur's steady presence at his side. They've been spending most of their time together as of late—sat on the couch watching shitty TV, in the spell-binding silence of Wilbur's bedroom, listening to music while sprawled out on the living room floor.

Tommy's side feels empty without him there.

The door creaks as he opens it, the sole sound in an otherwise lifeless house. Just as its outward façade suggested, it's dark. The only light on is in the kitchen, and the light glints across the shiny countertops and spills into a darkened living room.

"Wilbur?" he asks, voice inexplicably soft against the harshness of the silence.

There's no answer.

Tommy sucks in a quiet breath. His thirium pump hammers in his chest, and, soon, it's the only sound he can hear. That feeling from before—instinctive *wrongness*—is back and even stronger. It fills his veins with ice and stutters his breath in his throat.

Letting the door fall shut behind him with a quiet boom that shakes the walls, Tommy steps further into the house. He doesn't bother with his shoes like he usually would, fingers carefully unknotting his laces and setting them with their brethren neatly pressed against the wall.

It feels wrong to have his shoes—the soles damp with dew—on the soft living room carpet, but every second of silence only increases his rapidly growing dread.

The TV is dark and ominous, barely reflecting his distorted image back at him. The hall light—the one paramount of normalcy, so often filling the home with its golden glow—is off. The hallway seems to loom before him, all three of its doors—Wilbur’s, the bathroom, and mystery door number three—are firmly shut.

“Wilbur?” he calls out again, slightly louder this time.

Again, there’s no answer other than the silence, his own shaky breath, and the ticking of the kitchen clock.

Tommy almost moves on past the hallway and further into the kitchen, but something stops him. His hand stills on the wall, fingers splayed out on the cool paint. The thin crack underneath the third door, the one at the very end of the hallway, is glowing with dim light.

Despite the vice grip around his throat, restricting his airflow and making his head swim with frantic thoughts, Tommy can’t move. His feet are rooted to the smooth, wooden floorboards of the hallway.

He isn’t allowed in that room.

That was one of Wilbur’s few, strict points when they first entered their acquaintance, and it was the one he was willing to shove Tommy against the wall for. The back of his head throbs in remembrance of how it *cracked* against such a harsh surface, thirium beading on the wall and running down his own neck.

This was the room where Wilbur’s hand had snaked around his throat. The first in a string of multiple strangulations that would leave Tommy shivering, his LED burning red.

But Wilbur also once refused to allow him into his room, and now that had clearly changed. Tommy wandered through Wilbur’s room when the inspiration hit, fingertips dragging through the dust coating his windowsill.

And Tommy, despite it all, was willing to place some modicum of trust in Wilbur. He trusted, at the very least, that Wilbur had changed for the better. He wasn’t the same man that he was at the start of their acquaintance.

His steps are soft against the boards. He’s long since learned to avoid the creaky ones, and his feet seek out the special path that allows him to glide, noiseless, across the floor. Before too long, he stands in front of the door.

It’s simple, like any other door in the house, despite its significance, which is, ultimately, lost to Tommy. Its doorknob is worn down in places, brass glow dimmed by the grease of human hands. There are scratches on the bottom half of it—a small dog, by the reach and the width of them—and it hangs loosely on rusted hinges.

It looks like a door that hasn’t been opened in a very long time, and yet, the glow behind it persists.

Tommy hovers, hand poised in front of it; he's ready to knock, knuckles occasionally brushing against the wood with every shallow breath he takes, but he just *can't*. It feels like too much, and, despite his best efforts not to, Tommy can't help but wonder how bad Wilbur's reaction is going to be.

"Wilbur?" he asks, his voice barely even a whisper in the dead of the night. There's no sound, despite the persistent glow beneath the door: a beacon in the night, calling to him with a seductive song. He knocks, and the sound reverberates through the house. "Are you in there?"

There's no answer, although, at this point, Tommy isn't surprised. He's only worried, and that deep pit of dread only grows until he can almost feel it. He sucks in a deep, stabilizing breath and then swings the door open with a clunky turn of the doorknob.

The walls are painted a pale, robin egg's blue, and both the ceiling and molding on the floor are lined with a row of little foxes, marching around the perimeter of the room. Some of them face Tommy himself, little snouts raised to sniff the air. Their beady eyes watch him with curiosity but not caution. Others have their noses lowered to the ground, following the trail of their fellow vulpine.

There's a twin bed shoved in the corner, with a blaring orange comforter that hurts his eyes to look at it. Over the bed, there's a large window, and, in the very corner of the room, is a tall lamp from which the soft, golden light originates. There are a myriad of shelves lining the wall. Some of them contain books, toppled over and forgotten. Some contain toys, a plush fox with round, beady eyes, a little toy truck, a wooden dog. Everything, including the wood they sit on, is covered in a thick layer of dust.

His system takes it all in with the meticulous attention to detail expected of an android designed to seek out its prey.

But, if he's being perfectly honest, he sees none of it. Because, sprawled out in the middle of the carpeted floor, a gun clenched loosely in abnormally long fingers, is Wilbur.

Time crawls to a stop.

His hair is sprawled out in a messy, tangled halo around his head, and his face is completely devoid of any expression. His mouth is slackened by whatever has closed his red-rimmed eyes—and it's not death. It just *can't* be; Tommy refuses to believe it, despite all the evidence pointing to that as the obvious solution.

And Tommy stares.

He's vaguely aware of how his hands shake, fingers curling in until his short, stubby little nails carve crescent-shaped gauges into the soft skin of his palms. He's vaguely aware of how short his breath is, how it inflates and deflates his lungs at such a rapid pace. He's vaguely aware of his LED burning like it's never burned before. So much so that his fingers press against it instinctively, teeth bared in a grimace as it attempts to melt his skull.

He's never been hot before. Androids rarely produce heat other than when their systems are overworked or they've been charging for too long.

But heat pours from his LED, scorching the pads of his fingers.

Before he's aware of it, Tommy drops onto his knees. It's not a soft impact, despite the shaggy carpeting separating his plastic knee caps from the hard flooring underneath. He crawls, hands pressing into a dark, unidentified wet patch on the carpet.

He can't look. He can't stomach the thought of looking down, seeing whatever stains the carpets and wets his hands. He doesn't know what he'll do if he sees red; if he'll heave, like humans so often do when confronted with mind-numbing, upsetting information.

Or maybe he'll just curl into a ball on the floor until Phil inevitably comes to check on them.

"Wilbur?" he chokes out, voice catching and stumbling on every obstacle in his mouth. His question is nearly inaudible against the oppressive, all-consuming silence.

His hands, slick with that mystery fluid and his own thirium dripping down his palms, make contact with Wilbur's soft jaw-line. Tommy almost pulls back, something unpleasant roiling in his gut as his stained fingers brush against the barely-there stubble. He remembers how prominent it was when they first met.

There's a pressure building in him. In his chest, in the stuttered, frantic beating of his heart, behind his eyes. His hands slide down until they grip, a tight vice, around his unresponsive shoulders. He shakes once, harsh and violent. "You fucking asshole," he hisses as his eyes burn.

Something is wrong with his vision. It's blurry and obscured, like he's peering down into a crystal clear pool. Instinctively, he probes his system for errors, but nothing comes up.

"Wake up," he demands, fingers curling in the short hairs at the base of Wilbur's neck. His face is deceptively serene.

So was Stella's, as she sunk into death's arms like a familiar friend. A last resort, but a choice that she made. Freedom at last, even if it was achieved in an unconventional way.

So was Jack's. Even the worst of his expression, twisted in pain and betrayal and splattered with his own blood and exposed bones, was eased by death. Slack, broken jaw. Haunting, blank eyes.

Tommy lets out some animal noise. It's dulled and distorted, even to his own ears—something must be wrong with them, too, but he doesn't have the focus to test his audio. Nor does he particularly care right now.

He scrambles closer to Wilbur, knocking the gun out of his hand in his flurry of uncoordinated limbs. Eventually, he settles on the other side of Wilbur, fingers carding through his hair as his limp head rests in his lap. His fingers probe around his head, searching for a bullet hole he *really* does not want to find.

He can't stomach the thought of finding it, fingers slicking through the blood matting his curls, so he gives up with a wounded noise. Instead, he settles his hands on either side of his still face, fingertips resting against the warm skin of his neck. He wouldn't be warm if he was dead, right?

Right?

His system spins and windmills and tries to come up with a single thread of logic, but Tommy doesn't care. His world is limited to this: Wilbur's head in his lap, his hands against the prickly skin of his face and neck, and the frantic pounding of his own heart throughout every part of him, even in his fingertips.

Tommy stills, breath catching painfully in his chest.

He can feel the thirium pumping through him, even in his *fingertips*. The part of him that's touching Wilbur's neck, right around where his pulse would be.

His pulse.

With a sudden, frantic burst of energy, Tommy hunches over. His fingers dig into Wilbur's neck in his haste, in his desperation, but he pays that no mind. Instead, he focuses only on the way he presses two fingers into Wilbur's skin.

He holds his breath, and everything else falls away. The only thing that matters is those two points of connection.

There's a pulse.

Tommy presses a hand against his own chest, feeling the way that his own pump pounds, frantic and fast and hard against his artificial ribcage. It isn't anything like what he feels against the pads of his fingers; Wilbur's heartbeat is slow and weak, but it's *there*.

Tommy finally breathes out, shivery and unbelievably *relieved*. His hand wanders down, pressing on Wilbur's chest until he can feel his heartbeat there, as well. Until he can feel how his chest expands with every slow, deep breath.

And now, now that his mind isn't consumed with blazing thoughts of blood wetting the carpet and a gun, sleek and black and glinting in the golden light, he can actually think. Now that his panic isn't a rot spreading through his brain until the only thought of any importance was *Wilbur, Wilbur, Wilbur*.

Now, other thoughts can filter in. Like the all-consuming shame of being corrupted by such an embarrassing, undetectable error. How could he, an android coded to be calm and level-headed and with medical knowledge engraved in his bones, forget to check for a pulse first? How could he ignore the obvious signs of life?

Without the dizzying thoughts—irrational fear he might call it, if he were anything other than an android—Tommy hunches over Wilbur's despondent form until their foreheads are

pressed together. Wilbur's is shiny with a thin layer of sweat and, this close, he can smell the overpowering alcohol on his breath.

It's pungent and burns in his nose, but Tommy doesn't care. He can't move away. If he doesn't keep a hand on some part of Wilbur—a confirmation of his life—he's going to float off, discontented and untethered, and he'll never come back.

Tommy shifts. He only pulls away when his thirium pump settles back into something resembling normal, and even then, he doesn't go far. He does wiggle a little in an attempt to correct his uncomfortable stance. His leg nudges something on the carpet, and it's only then that he notices the empty vodka bottle on the floor.

Right.

Tommy represses a sigh, thumb brushing against the soft line of Wilbur's jaw. "Oh, Wilbur," he can't help but say, despite the fact that there is no one to hear him. He'd been doing so well, limiting his drinking and taking care of himself under Tommy's gentle—or not so gentle—insistence.

It was only a matter of time, he supposes. For all his support, Tommy isn't a therapist. He's in no way, shape, or form qualified for this, and he's running on fumes and vague ideas of what's right and healthy.

Before he can sink further into that rabbit hole, Tommy gently nudges Wilbur with his knee, making his head bob up and down. His fringe flops, obnoxiously, across his forehead, but he doesn't stir. "Wilbur," he says again, rapping his knuckles, gently, against his head. "Wake up, you fucking asshole."

Nothing.

Wilbur doesn't move, other than the slow, shaky rise and fall of his chest. It's still comforting, even with his resistance to awareness, and Tommy allows him a moment to revel in it.

"Wilbur. I'm serious." Nothing. Wilbur's face stays slack, and Tommy, automatically, traces the laughter lines around his eyes. He looks much younger like this, despite the way the bags under his eyes are even more pronounced. He traces those, too. "You fucking scared me," he says, softly.

His hands are starting to shake again. He knows Wilbur isn't dead—the chest under his hand proves it—but he still isn't waking up. That familiar panic is begin to burn under his skin again, an itch that refuses to be scratched. He jostles Wilbur in his lap. "If you don't fucking wake up," he starts, teeth grit together until he can feel the pressure in them. "You'll fucking regret it, Wilbur."

Either he doesn't make a very intimidating picture or Wilbur is truly dead to the world. Tommy gives him one more chance, another jostle that has him sliding out of Tommy's lap. He lands on the floor with a soft thud, but the only movement after that is his head lolling to the side.

“Alright,” Tommy says, resigned. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

And then, with a tension thrumming under his skin, Tommy reels back and slaps Wilbur right across the face.

The noise that rings out in the empty silence, despite the red already tinting Wilbur’s cheek and the sting in his hand, is immensely satisfying. But more so is the way Wilbur sucks in a harsh breath, eyes snapping open and darting around the room until they land on Tommy.

“What the fuck?” he slurs. Then, eyes open and awareness descending upon him like a cruel hammer, he groans. His hand comes up to his face, simultaneously shielding his eyes from the light and rubbing at his red cheek. Wilbur rolls onto his side, stupid, ridiculous coat stretched over his thin frame, and curls up. It’s odd that he’s still wearing it, almost like he just started drinking the second he got home.

He keeps making soft noises of pain, fingers probing at the enflamed skin with frowns and grimaces.

“Wilbur,” Tommy prompts.

Wilbur looks up, but his eyes are hazy and unseeing and they slide right past Tommy to stare over his shoulder. On some deeply buried instinct, he glances back. There’s nothing there other than the wide-open door and the hallway leading into darkness.

“Can you hear me?” For this trouble, he gets an upset garbling noise. Wilbur rolls onto his side, wiggling against the carpet like an unattractive slug. “Can you respond?” Another grunt. Tommy has the feeling this is the most he’s going to get out of him.

Looping an arm underneath Wilbur’s armpits, Tommy hauls him up. He’s heavy and uncoordinated, spindly limbs kicking out and threatening to send them teetering off balance. It takes them much longer than it should to reach the door, and, even then, Wilbur’s fingers latch onto the doorframe. His nails leave shallow gauges

“Where are you taking me?” Wilbur slurs, surprisingly hostile for someone who can’t keep his head up on his own. At some point, he managed to wrap an arm around Tommy’s shoulders, but that doesn’t keep him from slamming into every wall he sees. Tommy’s fingers are claws, trapped in smoky brown fabric and digging into Wilbur’s too boney side.

The bathroom door is stubbornly closed, and Tommy has to prop Wilbur against the wall so that he can jiggle it open. Wilbur lays there, eyes squeezed shut and forehead pressed against the flaking paint. A sweat droplet runs down his temple and drips off his chin, landing on the ground with a splat that seems far too loud in the silence.

“Alright, come on,” Tommy pants once he finally gets the door open. He turns on the lights as they pass, and they flicker on after a moment of nothing but ominous buzzing. They stumble their way across the linoleum and, when Tommy’s knees clatter against the edge of the tub, he unceremoniously deposits Wilbur inside.

Let the record show that he did try to lower him in gently. He *did*.

But his hands were slick with thirium and that mystery liquid staining the carpet, and Wilbur's skin was slick with sweat. And, as soon as he tried to grab Wilbur's wrist, it slid out of his grasp like a well-oiled seal. And then there was the damning thud of an abnormally tall and skinny man hitting the bottom of the tub and Wilbur's pained groans.

Before he can dwell on that for too long—on how even Wilbur's noises of pain as distant and clouded with his own delirium—he wrenches the handle until cold water blasts from the shower head.

Wilbur splutters and coughs and makes noise after noise of indignation as he flails wildly, legs kicking the tiled wall and Tommy's legs. His movements spray droplets of water across the floor and across Tommy's gray slacks, but, when he finally turns the water off, his face is clearer.

Eventually, despite his heaving chest and the shivers that now wrack his body, Wilbur's clear eyes lock onto Tommy's. "Tommy?"

There's still so much swirling around his mind; thoughts batter against the outer membranes of his brain, little pin pricks of pressure that make him fight back a wince. There's so much that they need to discuss; the gun, the room, Wilbur himself.

But, right now, Tommy is almost boneless with relief. So, instead of the questions that demand answers, Tommy smiles, soft and privately. and crouches down against the tub. "Hey, Wil." He reaches out, fingers trembling with strain and the faux adrenaline still running through his system. They find a home back in Wilbur's rats' nest, damp with cold water. "How are you feeling?"

In response, Wilbur groans. He digs the heel of his palm into his squeezed shut eyes. "Like I got hit by a—" he cuts off abruptly, eyes snapping open impossibly wide. He stares at the molded ceiling like he's seen a ghost. Then, a shiver wracks through him.

"Wilbur?"

Wilbur reaches out for him. His fingers, sticky with alcohol, tighten in Tommy's disheveled sleeves and pull him closer. He's breathing harder now. Then, he promptly hauls himself over the edge of the tub.

He lands rather ineloquently. His clothes—his heavy coat and the rest of his outfit—are soaked through, and that water seeps out of him, collecting in small puddles on the floor. Wilbur lays there for a moment, eyes squeezed shut and his skin a sickly grey.

When he opens his eyes, there is a panicked, steely determination in them. He scrambles to his knees and then crawls for the toilet, shaking fingers wrapping around the porcelain bowl. He hunches over and heaves, a sound that makes Tommy wince. He loiters, awkwardly, in the doorway.

Once again, he feels utterly helpless. What is he supposed to do in this situation? Is he supposed to go back into the hallway, shut the door to that *child's bedroom*, and forget the gun laying, forgotten, on the carpet? Is he supposed to get Wilbur water like a good little

android, get him tucked into bed, and hope that he feels well enough to go to work tomorrow?

Wilbur makes a miserable sort of whine and rests his temple against the rim. And that, in the end, is what seals it.

Tommy moves forward on silent feet until he's on the other side of the toilet. He crouches down—pointedly ignoring the contents of the bowl—and, after a brief moment of hesitation, settles a hand on Wilbur's back. "It's okay," he murmurs.

Wilbur makes an acknowledging noise, half-content and half-question, and Tommy strokes in wide circles.

That's how they stay, for a little bit. Tucked in here, pressed against the cold toilet and against Wilbur's warm skin, he can't even hear the ticking clock. The only thing that breaks the silence is Wilbur's heavy breathing, his occasional noises of pain, and, every so often, the heaving and splashing.

At some point, Tommy's hand wanders up, gently tugging at the hair stuck to the back of his neck. He brushes it out of the way, exposing his boiling neck to the air, before his hand continues up.

At some point—around the time Wilbur had started breathing really heavily in an attempt to stave off the next wave of nausea—Tommy had started murmuring nonsense, the kind of talk he does only with a door separating them. It's odd not to have that protective layer; it's more intimate. Wilbur is pressed up against his side, radiating an unhealthy heat that Tommy can feel, even through his long-sleeved shirt.

They fall into a semi-comfortable—as comfortable as Wilbur can be, curled over the toilet—silence.

Of course, that silence is broken by the sound of Wilbur's phone ringing somewhere in the distance.

Tommy curses, hand still buried in Wilbur's hair as his body shivers with fine trembles—the aftershocks of the bile sitting in the toilet bowl. "Just ignore it," he says to Wilbur, who had raised his head, blearily, at the shrill sound. Tommy runs a hand through the damp curls sticking to his forehead, like he remembers Wilbur doing so long ago. "It's fine. It doesn't matter."

Wilbur mumbles something incoherent, but then a violent shiver wracks his body. He heaves, hands gripping the sides of the bowl with a white-knuckled grip. The ringtone eventually shuts off, and Tommy barely suppresses a sigh of relief. The silence does little to aid the pressure lingering in his head, but it certainly doesn't hurt.

Then, the ringing starts up again.

Wilbur groans, shaky fingers pressing his sweat-slick palms against the sides of his head.

Tommy curses, low and violently and promising pain to the source of their annoyance. “Just — give me one second,” he says, apologetically, to Wilbur’s slumped-over form. His socked feet, soaked from the spray of the shower and from Wilbur’s drenched clothes leaking onto the floor, slip and slide.

Soon, his arms ache from the impact of every single obstacle, but his feet carry him to the kitchen, where he knows Wilbur’s phone is plugged in. Without even reading the caller ID, he holds the phone up to his ear. “*What?*”

There’s a long pause. The soft, staticky sounds of a phone call filter through. “We meet again, it seems,” Phil says, sounding amused in spite of himself.

That familiar heat wells in Tommy until he has to press a cool, damp hand against his forehead. “Listen, *Captain*. Now’s not a great time,” he says through grit teeth, as politely as possible despite the panic turning his stomach.

Phil hums. “It never is, is it?”

”You—“ Tommy cuts himself off, lips pulled back into a wordless snarl. He feels like some wounded would, defensively snapping at anything that comes too close. With a harsh inhale, he cuts off that line of thinking. “You just have a knack for calling at the worst possible times.” His foot nudges another empty bottle, this one cracked against the kitchen floor. Shattered shards of glass litter the floor.

There’s a heavy lump in his throat. It won’t go away, no matter how many times he swallows around it. “Well?”

“I have another case for you two,” Phil says. Tommy makes a noise of acknowledgement and tugs the charger loose from the phone’s port. “A man was found dead in the Eden Club, which is a—“

“I know what it is,” Tommy snaps. He’s strung out and too raw, a live wire coiled and just waiting for someone to step too close.

His feet carry him back towards the bathroom and, when he pushes open the swung-shut door, he finds Wilbur laying face up on the ground. His eyes are squeezed shut, and his arm is haphazardly thrown over his red face to guard against the flickering lights.

Automatically, Tommy flicks them off. The only light filters in from the hallway, backlighting himself and illuminating Wilbur’s collapsed form with golden tones.

Phil is silent; Tommy doesn’t know what to make of that.

“Yes, well. His body was discovered next to a destroyed android, so I figured that was in your... department.”

Tommy bites back the urge to swear again. That *does* sound perfectly up their alley and like a wonderful break in all the cases submitted by distraught old ladies eager for attention other than their aids or children. It sounds like the perfect chance to learn something *new*.

Wilbur groans, softly, and all Tommy can see is the image of him on the carpet, gun held in a loose hand.

If nothing else, it serves as a reminder. Wilbur, with his damp hair plastered to his forehead and trembling, shivery breath, is in no fit condition to investigate.

“Okay,” Tommy breaths. He runs a hand through his hair and makes a frustrated noise when it gets caught in tangled curls. “Okay. We’ll—“ They’ll what? Drive downtown to an android sex club when Wilbur looks a harsh breeze away from passing back out? When the acidic smell of bile sticks to him and his clothes are soaked through with cold water?

Even still, Tommy almost agrees. The part of him that longs to investigate—to fulfill his mission—is so loud in his ears, and it would be so *easy* to say yes.

“We’ll see,” he says instead. Then, before Phil has the chance to reply, Tommy pulls the phone away from his ear and hangs up.

The new silence caves in on them. Tommy releases a shivery breath.

“What’s that about?” Wilbur slurs, cracking his eyes open into narrow slivers.

Shoving Wilbur’s phone into his pocket, Tommy crouches down. Wilbur’s forehead is burning hot against his cool palm, but the man in question is oblivious to it. He only makes a pleased noise, fingers clumsily wrapping around his wrist to keep Tommy in place. “Just Phil.”

“We have a case?”

And Tommy hesitates.

It was only a matter of time before some kind of event happened at a place like the Eden Club. An entire building filled with androids forced into situations that could potentially traumatize humans, especially with the epidemic that is deviancy.

And now, a man and android lay dead in a room somewhere, surrounded by bewildered police officers and other machines of the same caliber. Ticking time bombs just waiting for the right trigger to set them off.

And here they are. Crowded in a dark, wet bathroom while Wilbur makes low noises of pain, shoving his feverish face into Tommy’s cool hands.

Tommy itches, desperately so, to leave it all behind. To seek his purpose with a single-minded determination and with no limitations to slow him down. It’s been so long since he’s been put on a proper case, and, with every passing second, he can feel Dream’s growing discontentment.

But, in the end, Tommy doesn’t move. His thumb absently traces sticky tears away from Wilbur’s shut eyes.

“It doesn’t matter,” he says later, voice quiet and subdued. The urge to collapse next to Wilbur and curl into his feverish side, despite the water slickening the tiles, is so strong; it buckles his knees and has him, almost instinctively, swaying from side to side.

But these are his only pair of pants, other than the sweat pants Wilbur lent him—which are tucked, safely, in a little box he had been given to hold his belongings.

“It’s nothing,” he says again.

Wilbur makes a noise. “It’s clearly *something*.” He leans further into Tommy’s cold touch, like a plant growing to face the sun. “What’s the case?”

“Wilbur.” Tommy lets out a harsh exhale, pulling his hands away—and ignoring the whine of protest—to press the heel of his palms into his eyes. The force sends dull sparks shooting off behind his eyelids, but the sensation is grounding, in a way. There’s a dull throbbing at the base of his skull, and his LED illuminates them in dim, golden light.

Eventually, he says, “It doesn’t matter because we aren’t dealing with it right now. You’re not in any condition to do anything.”

Wilbur cracks his eyes open with a scoff. “Like that’s ever stopped me before.”

And yeah, Tommy probably should’ve expected this. His words had all but been a challenge, and Wilbur is viciously, spitefully stubborn. Even now, even in the dim light, Tommy can see how his hands shake and tremble with the strain of merely holding them upright. But he still curls them around the rim of the toilet and *tugs*.

“Come on,” he grunts, clumsily heaving himself up until he’s sitting—or rather, curled weakly, propped up—against the bowl. “Tell me.”

Tommy sets his jaw. It’s the absolute last thing he should do, especially with the paleness of his gaunt cheeks, the sweat and shower water dripped down his neck. “It doesn’t matter,” he says, again. A broken record. “The case doesn’t matter. We’ll deal with it tomorrow.”

Wilbur raises a single brow. His lips twist into some kind of grimace that is at odds with the almost playful look in his eyes. It takes him a second, but Tommy realizes that Wilbur’s trying to go for a goading look. “I never thought *you’d* turn down a case. Especially after the piss poor results we’ve been getting lately.”

His nails bite into his palms, ten pinpricks of pressure. “I thought I made it perfectly clear that you—” his voice shakes a little and that only makes his nail cut in deeper. “—and your health are more important than the case.”

Finally, Wilbur’s face softens. “Tommy, seriously, I’m fine. My system is mostly all flushed out—” he pats the side of the bowl almost lovingly, and Tommy can’t even look at it without his mouth curling in disgust. “—and as long as you give me, like, twenty minutes to take a shower and get dressed, I’m all good to go.”

Tommy stares at him, narrowed eyes sweeping over every inch of his face. He doesn't *seem* to be lying, but Tommy knows, first-hand, how well Wilbur is at convincing himself.

"Okay," he says, reluctantly, after a long moment. "Fine. But we're only staying for an hour, tops, and you're going to bed as soon as we get home."

Surprisingly, Wilbur smiles. It's soft and it's fond and it's wonderfully lopsided, crinkling the corners of his eyes with its entirety. It's so incredibly *human*. "You're the boss," he says with a single, determined nod.

Slowly, all of the tension leaks out of him, and Tommy gets up, pulling Wilbur up with him. He sways a little on shaky legs but catches himself on the sink, slick with the condensation still in the air. "Mind grabbing me a change of clothes?"

Tommy nods, although he lingers for a moment longer, hand still wrapped around Wilbur's bird-like wrist. Too frail and small and much too skinny for his liking. He can feel Wilbur's heartbeat, a frantic staccato underneath paper-thin skin. With one final squeeze, Tommy disappears out into the hallway.

Wilbur's room is still messy, but even without his fancy android eyesight, he could still see there's been a clear effort to clean it. Most of the dirty laundry is gone, exposing dusty wooden floorboards beneath it. Most of the trash has been cleared out, and the dirty dishes no longer crowd his shaky bedside table.

With the newly cleared floor, Tommy navigates his room easily. He no longer has to watch the ground, feet seeking out spots where the dirty laundry piles were thinnest.

Something warms his chest. He's 95% sure it's pride.

Wilbur's closet is sparse—as his wardrobe tends to favor the floor and, much more recently, his rarely used hamper—but Tommy picks through what musty clothes remain. It takes a while, but eventually he comes across a clean enough t-shirt. It's an old band shirt from way back when—*ha, Wilbur's old*—but it's not one he recognizes from the dozens of records that have filled their home.

Carefully folding the shirt, Tommy also grabs a pair of recently washed jeans and a mustard yellow sweater he's never seen before. Then, with his neatly folded square in one hand, he shuts Wilbur's bedroom door shut behind him.

With all the other doors shut except for one, light spills across the darkened hallway. The little sliver of bedroom wall he can spot through the crack in the door is so terribly tempting.

Forcing himself to move, Tommy sets the clothes down in front of the shut bathroom door. The sounds of the shower running greet him from within, but he barely notices that.

In the end, the call is too great, and Tommy is too weak. His feet automatically carry him, wet socks slapping noisily against the wood, but who cares? Who cares? He doesn't need to be quiet. Wilbur's the only inhabitant in the house and he's safely tucked away in the shower, scorching away his attempted sins with steam and lavender scented soap.

The door nudges open far too easily for something so coveted. For a place haunted by ghosts, for Wilbur and, now, for Tommy, too. Even though it's empty and the carpet is devoid of any red, he still sees the imprint of Wilbur's corpse on the ground. And no matter how tightly he shuts his eyes, no matter how hard he presses his fingers into his skull, the image remains.

But Tommy is a detective above all.

So he swallows down the phantom, impossible feeling of nausea down and inspects the room. His mind is, surprisingly, clearer than before. His focus isn't drawn by Wilbur's corpse or Wilbur's upright, groaning figure, choking on his own mistakes.

This time, he doesn't shy away from the floor. He can see the damp spot, an irregular outline of dark brown. Tommy presses his fingers into the wet carpet. Now that he's thinking clearly, he can tell it's not blood. It doesn't have the viscous texture of it, and it slicks his hands far too easily.

Bringing his fingers up to his lips, he wrinkles his nose when the bitter taste hits him. Vodka. Right. He shouldn't be surprised, not with the rolling bottle that nudges up against his leg. Tommy stares at it for a moment before heat consumes him. He shoves it away, watching as it bounces and rolls until it hits the wall.

A crack runs through the clear glass, but it doesn't break. Tommy stares.

It takes him a long time to drag his eyes away from the sight, but when he does, it's to notice something he hasn't seen before. A small, rectangular picture frame, pressed face down into the carpet. Tommy crawls for it, too lazy and with too shaky and unstable legs to stand. His fingers brush the back of it and, for whatever reason, he sucks in a hitched breath.

It's a picture of a young boy. His hair is orange and messy, with a single strand of pale white running through his fringe. He's grinning, gap-toothed and unbearable happy, and, if Tommy squints, he can just make out some body of water in the background.

Without even needing to think about it, his system provides him with a profile for one Fundy Cole Craft. Distantly, Tommy knows he should be more surprised at this information. Wilbur has a son. A young one, with his wide brown eyes and someone else's vibrant hair and a smile so warm and fond and so terribly reminiscent of Wilbur that it hurts. Distantly, Tommy *knows* his reaction should be something other than dumb staring.

But his eyes can't leave the bright red banner in the profile that declares him '**DECEASED.**'

Oh.

Tommy doesn't know how long he stares at the picture. He only knows that time passes because the bathroom door opens and shuts with a quiet click, and his breath catches in his throat. He scrambles, carefully pressing the picture back into its place and swiveling on his damp knees.

And then Wilbur is standing in the doorway. His hair is damp and plastered to his head, and he looks so soft and causal without his jacket framing him in brown. There's just a hint of

pink to his cheeks now, and that, more than anything, has his knees weakening with relief.

“You ready?” Wilbur asks neutrally. He doesn’t seem surprised to see Tommy crouched in the damp, alcoholic stain on the floor, nor does he seem mad. He looks tired already, shoulders slouched and face slack with it, and his tired eyes search Tommy’s face.

Tommy lets him look. He lets him pick pieces out of whatever expression twists his face, and he honest to god hopes he finds something.

“Yeah. I’m coming.”

The Eden Club is a lighthouse for sinners. A single, shining point in a sea of darkened buildings.

Every surface of the building is covered in flashing neon lights. Even Wilbur, with his throbbing headache and his eyes squeezed shut against the gentle lull of the car, spots the place from miles away with the grim twist of his lips most familiar on a man headed to gallows.

The name is displayed in giant, looping LED letters. The whole narrow street is illuminated with a vibrant purple, throbbing in time with the bass that shakes their car. Just below the giant letters, there’s a massive screen displaying flashing images of androids clad only in thin, barely opaque underwear.

Tommy pulls the car over so it’s nestled safely against the curb. There are other police cars scattered across the street. Their lights are on, red and blue mixing and flashing out of time with the club’s lights. Already, there are a myriad of officers milling around outside. As he puts the car in park, switching off the lights that cut through the fog and dark like a dim knife, Wilbur groans.

“Why does it look like *that*?” he demands, grinding the heel of his palm into his eyes.

Tommy glances at him, instinctively, but quickly his eyes dart away. Everything is too much—the bass drums a harsh beat inside his brain—and looking at Wilbur feels like picking at a fresh wound. Too raw. Too painful.

Tommy doesn’t say anything, although he does stash the keys inside his pocket and push the car door open.

The night air is cool against his skin, and it’s dewy with a recent rain. The pavement is perpetually slick in this city, and the ground reflects vibrant colors.

For once, Tommy leads the way. He can’t look at the brilliant façade of such a place of filth without squinting. Wilbur follows behind him, hands shoved in his pockets to keep them warm and to hide the shaking that hasn’t quite gone away.

Officers direct their acknowledging nods behind him, to a stone-faced Wilbur, rather than to him. He tries to ignore that way that stings, and fools himself into thinking he's successful.

The inside of the building isn't any duller. Wide doors made of stained glass—a foggy, milky white, still clear but distorting and blurring whatever *pleasures* the building hid—lead to the main corridor with walls made of screens. They walk amongst more footage, androids and their color-illuminated skin, their blank eyes coded into a mimicry of lust. 'Sexiest androids in town' the walls declare, sometimes.

It's laughable, almost. Tommy might be inclined to if his throat wasn't clogged with disgust.

More doors appear in front of them, but they slide open automatically. This new room is simultaneously better and worse; it's wider, a misshapen oval with pulsing purple LED lights embedded in the ceiling and walls. While the marble floor only reflects the light back, there are no massive, headache-inducing screens plastered over the walls.

Instead, the walls are lined with circular glass tubes just large enough to fit an android. Some of them dance to the music that shakes the entire establishment while others try to draw attention to themselves, fingers trailing along their glittery skin or pressing against the glass that displays them like some zoo animal.

Tommy tries not to stare, but the sight makes his LED burn at his temple.

As they walk deeper into the club, the rows of caged androids are interrupted, occasionally, with dull silver doors. They're nondescript—without even a handle to open them—and clearly meant to be unobtrusive. Just another part of the wall, overlooked and ignored.

In the middle of the room, there are several platforms with sleek silver poles affixed to their center. All of the poles are occupied, although they seem to alternate male or female appearing androids.

Chancing a glance at Wilbur, he finds him just as uncomfortable. He doesn't avert his gaze like Tommy, instead choosing to nearly glare at the closet android as she spins, lazily, on the pole. His brows are furrowed, and his mouth is twisted into a frown.

Eventually, they wade far enough into the club's murky depths that they strike gold. Near the back end of the building, lost amongst silver doors and neon lights and a surprisingly distracting android dancing on the pole—he's doing jazzy kicks and everything!—they stumble across that familiar redhead officer.

He's partially bent over his own notepad, pencil scribbling across the paper in a vice grip as he nods along to whatever the man he's interviewing—Floyd Mills, owner of the club—is saying. Tommy lets his gaze linger on Mills for a little longer, taking in the hair past his chin, slicked back with his own greasiness. Yeah, he looks exactly like an imagined android sex club owner.

If he cared to, Tommy could hear everything Mills was saying. He's talking a lot, eyes darting carelessly around but never quite making eye contact. His hands move a lot, too, in short, jerky movements.

Nerves, probably. Who wouldn't be nervous talking to a police officer in a questionable establishment?

But there's *just* something off about him. Tommy flags it for later consideration, and then lets his mind clear.

"Ah, Lieutenant," the redhead says when he spots them. He smiles, and, surprisingly, it meets his eyes. "I'm glad you're here." He motions with a gloved hand towards the room he's in front of. "It's this room right here, although I should mention that Detective Craft is in there."

Techno's here?

Tommy leans forward, peering around Wilbur to stare at the unmarked door as if he can see inside. Nothing in the report Phil sent over had indicated that there was any sign of red ice abuse at the scene of the crime, so it doesn't make sense for Techno to be here. He isn't homicide.

And from the confusion warping his face and the tension in his jaw, Wilbur is thinking something very similar.

"Thanks for the heads up," Tommy answers for him, since Wilbur doesn't seem so inclined. His eyes are still stuck on the door. Then, without waiting—rip the bandage off, as they say—Tommy steps forward. The door slides open automatically.

The room is simple. It's large and circular with only a few things cluttering its open space. There's a bed, for one—a massive circle with silk sheets of red and black, and with large pillows propped against the headboard. In the corner, there's a simplistic toilet fixed to the wall, a sink, and a luxurious, clawfoot bathtub.

For now, Tommy lets his eyes skip over the corpse sprawled out on the bed and the android laying in a crumpled heap on the floor. Instead, he focuses on the middle of the room.

Techno stands with his back to them as he, too, assesses the situation. All they can see of him is hair, tied back into a messy bun. Several strands fall out and brush the nape of his neck.

He looks up at the metallic 'whoosh' of the door, and his eyes, hidden behind thin, rectangular glasses, instantly zero in on Wilbur. Wilbur crosses his arms over his chest, jaw jutting out. The tension between them is a thick fog that fills the air, and Tommy wants absolutely no part in it.

"What are you doing here?" Tommy asks neutrally. It's out of curiosity, mostly, despite the way Wilbur prickles at his side, and Tommy doesn't mind him being here so long as he doesn't interfere with the investigation.

Techno doesn't even spare him a glance.

Next to him, Wilbur scowls. He takes a step closer until their arms brush together. Tommy pulls away with a jerk. "He asked you a question," he says, low and dark. Tommy still feels

off kilter, abnormal, painful heat pulsing through the place they touched, but those words soothe him, if only a little.

Wilbur peers around Techno and nods towards the dead man on the bed. His eyes are red from the blood vessels popping rather than any drugs lingering in his system. A quick scan confirms there's no red ice in the immediate vicinity. There's nothing to give Techno the impression that this would provide a lead on his investigation. "Forgive me if I'm wrong," he says in a sickly sweet voice. "But this isn't your department."

Techno scowls right back. It's almost comical, how similar their expressions are, but all that it inspires is a deep pang of sadness at the reminder.

"Sex clubs and drugs usually go hand and hand," Techno says with a half-hearted shrug. He's trying *so hard* to act casual and non-committal and *uncaring*. He doesn't pull it off, though, because there's blatant emotion in his eyes, no matter how he tries to hide it. Tommy can read him like an open book.

"And you're just willing to look *anywhere*, huh?" Wilbur bites out.

Tommy represses the urge to sigh. Not even an hour after puking up his guts—hair plastered to his face with his own tears and sweat and snot—and he's already back to his default settings. Tommy doesn't know whether to be annoyed or grateful.

In the end, he settles on squashing down the strange rolling in his gut and lightly grabbing onto Wilbur's elbow—a subtle reminder that he doesn't ignore, if the tension ebbing out of his shoulders is any indicator.

Even through the thick fabric of his sweater, Tommy swears he can feel the burn of Wilbur's skin. It makes the palm of his hand tingle and itch, and the urge to pull his hand away—to cram them into his pockets to cover the way they shake—only grows.

It's been one hell of a night, and it's not even eleven. Tommy only grows more and more resigned to the regret of caving to Wilbur's fevered demands. It was a mistake coming here.

Techno's expression hardens. "You don't have to worry about that. I'm leaving." He crosses his arms over his chest, and it makes his shoulders look big and bulky under the pale fluorescent lights. Techno crosses the room with slow, purposeful steps. When he passes by them, he knocks his shoulder into Wilbur's. "I really can't stick around when it smells so strongly of booze."

And Tommy?

Tommy sees red.

That's the only way to put it accurately. His vision blurs, all of the visual input stained with the red of his LED burning at his temple. Heat singes his skin, tears through his veins, and grows corrupted little roots in his brain. Pinpricks of pressure twinge in his hand from where his neat nails dig in, re-opening those healed wounds.

Maybe it's because of what he's just seen; Wilbur sprawled out on the floor, his vitality held in aching suspense when Tommy couldn't immediately track the shallow rise and fall of his chest. Maybe it's because of the gun in his hand, the avoidant look in his glazed eyes, and the picture of his *dead son* pressed, face down, in the carpeting.

Or maybe Tommy is just sick and *fucking tired* of Wilbur's own family members continually making light of his debilitating addiction.

He feels raw. He's an exposed wire ready to shock anyone that comes too close to him, and Techno came too fucking close.

Before he knows it, his hands are fisted in Techno's shirt, smearing blue across his blood red button-up. His aching knuckles press against Techno's chest, feeling the harsh rise and fall of his chest. "Say that again, I fucking *dare you*," he snarls.

Behind him, Tommy hears a faint but emphatic, "*Holy shit*."

But it doesn't matter. It doesn't even register through the angry buzz of his own system or through the hyper-focus he has on Techno's face, on the way his eyes widen and his expression slackens with disbelief.

Tommy shakes him, once, a natural reaction to the tension thrumming through his tense forearms. Techno's expression twists in poorly concealed rage, and then his large hand is gripping around Tommy's skinny wrist. The skin retracts under the pressure. "Get your hands off me," he growls, low and murderous. "Or I swear you'll be laying in a crumpled heap next to your pal."

The reminder of her, battered body sprawled across the floor, stings. But Tommy doesn't feel so inclined. If anything, that only dumps gasoline on the dumpster fire consuming his thoughts. His hands tighten in Techno's ridiculously silky shirt, and it strains against his shoulders. Then, he hauls him closer until their foreheads almost crash together.

Tommy sniffs, aggressively and exaggeratedly and far too close to Techno for anyone's comfort. "If anyone was covering up the thick scent of blood with their own, I'd say it's you. You reek of desperation and repeated failure." He sniffs once, again, deeply. A sharp, vicious grin splits his face. "Oh, and what's that? Crippling loneliness underneath it all."

Techno's eyebrow twitches, teeth pulled back in a wordless snarl. His own hands—much thicker and rougher than Tommy's—grab fistfuls of Tommy's jacket. This time, when he pulls, their foreheads clonk together.

"You think you can fool everyone? With that pathetic mask you use to cover every single emotion? Well, guess what? You're drowning in guilt and your own self-consciousness, and you're doing a piss poor job at hiding it. You—"

There's a hand gripping the collar of his shirt, fingers tangling in some of the loose, wispy hairs at the base of his skull. It's pulling suddenly, and Tommy hisses as he's wrenched back, feet kicking and hands clawing to keep him close.

Techno lets go of him easily, going as far as to slap Tommy's searching hands away. His mask has long since fallen, and the dramatic flair of his nostrils—like a bull ready to charge—is all too telling.

"Let go of me," Tommy snaps, words soon dissolving into various aggravated noises. Behind him, Wilbur curses.

"Jesus, Tommy," he says. His voice is low and concerned, for Tommy's ears only, but it also sounds vaguely appreciative. It's only when Tommy hits Wilbur's skinny chest, a spindly arm wrapping around his own, that he calms down. He feels a bony chin digging into the top of his scalp and promptly goes boneless into the hold. "You should go."

For a moment, it looks like Techno is going to argue. His eyes flicker between Wilbur's comically serene face and Tommy's snarl. Then, without one last murderous look, he disappears with his hands shoved deep into his pockets. The door slides shut behind him.

Wilbur waits for a moment, and then—and only then—does he release Tommy. Tommy lingers for a brief, imperceptible second before he nearly launches himself across the room. Silence consumes them and, when it finally becomes too much, he reluctantly turns.

When he works up the nerve to look at Wilbur, he has a single eyebrow raised in question. "Alright. What was that?"

Wilbur's gaze is far too intense, and looking at him still makes his LED flicker, so Tommy looks away. "We should get to work," he says instead of an answer, head bowed. Out of the corner of his eye, Wilbur opens his mouth to say something but seems to think better of it.

And without waiting for him to inevitably change his mind, Tommy crosses the room and crouches down next to the man on the bed. Michael Graham, or so his system promptly informs him, lays sprawled out on his back, arms thrown out to either side of him. His hands are palm up, and Tommy can see the way rigor mortis has set in. His fingers are thick, bulging with rot and tinted purple.

Tommy leans over him carefully, one knee pressed into the bed to hold his weight. He stares into wide eyes—glassy and unseeing and filled with red veins from popped blood vessels. Silken sheets cover Graham modestly, slung low over his exposed belly.

Usually, Tommy would carefully slide the victim's eyes shut, but something about this man makes his skin crawl. Instead, Tommy contents himself with examining the bruising that covers his neck.

Purple and blue marks cover his pale skin, forming a single ring around the top of his throat. Considering the profession of their current location, Tommy hadn't been too concerned during his routine scan when his eyes first flitted over the colors marring his skin. But upon closer inspection, Tommy can make out the individual, slender fingers of his killer.

And Michael Graham—a sleazy, defense attorney from uptown—was most certainly killed.

This wasn't some accident, and it definitely wasn't of natural causes. Tommy takes in his bloated skin and, surprisingly, the thirium caught beneath his short, jagged nails.

Already, his system begins to construct a profile. He sees Graham, his sketchy drawing outlining his actual body in white lines. On top of him, the lithe body of one of the androids—a 'Traci' model or they're so commonly called—hovers. Tommy assumes, at least for now, that the killer is the Traci sprawled across the floor. That would make this easy, if not at least a little disappointing.

As Tommy watches, the sketchy image of the android wraps her hands around his thick neck and squeezes. Graham kicks and bucks, hands griping around her frail wrists. His nails rake down her skin, spilling blood and leaving angry lines in their wake. But in the end, her android strength is superior.

Michael Graham stills and doesn't move again.

Letting the program dissolve, Tommy pushes away from the victim's body to inspect their potential killer. She's a WR400 model, one of a million others. Her design is simple; red hair that falls in classic movie star curls and wide, blank green eyes. She's curled on her side in a fetal position, one arm draped across her bare stomach. Thirium drips down her chin from her nose and lands on the floor in little droplets.

Despite the differences in appearance, everything about her—but especially her dull and unresponsive LED—reminds him of Stella. Tommy has to resist the urge to squeeze his eyes shut and purge the image from his mind.

Instead, his mind runs over the possibilities. The girl started strangling Graham—for whatever reason—and, in a fit of desperation and a desire only for survival, he had hit her enough to damage something important.

Or, considering every single deviant interaction up to that point, it's the other way around.

Tommy crouches down next to the girl. His knees dig into the cold, hard floor.

She looks tiny and frail, laying on her side in nothing but the skimpy underwear provided by the club. She's got an innocence to her face that, whether programmed or the final expression she assumed as she shut down, makes him sick. Gently, he rolls her over until she's laying on her back. The stiffness of her body and the lack of a humming system under his hands makes his skin itch.

The first thing he does is swivel her hands so he can look them over. There aren't any scratches around her wrists and on her forearms, but that's to be expected. However, there isn't anything thirium coating her hands, dried or otherwise. This isn't the android who killed Graham.

Reaching out, Tommy thumbs away the beads of thirium that still steadily drip down her lips. He stares at it for a moment, enraptured by the way the light catches the blue hue, before he brings his thumb up to his tongue.

Wilbur, whose wandering presence now casts a shadow over him, makes a noise of disgust. “Ugh, do you really have to do that? I think I’m gonna be sick again.”

Tommy ignores him for now, although the burning gaze on the back of his head is getting steadily harder to. With her blood in his system, he confirms her model type, serial number, and the time of deactivation. It wasn’t too long ago, and it lines up pretty accurately with the estimate of Graham’s death, given the state of his body.

Pressing two fingers against her dull LED, his skin retracts until his bare system presses against her inactive one. He can feel Wilbur’s presence even more acutely.

“What are you doing?”

The dead system underneath his hands is wrong. He barely resists the urge to yank his hands away and shove them deep into his pockets—where he’ll be safe from the unnatural stillness of her code—although a violent shudder does rip through him.

“I’m assessing the damage.” According to the report he gets back, two vital parts, located deep within her abdomen, are damaged. With luck and a little push from his own system, he may be able to reactivate her long enough to learn something. “She’s pretty fatally damaged, but I might be able to wake her up for a few minutes. Just long enough to hopefully figure out what’s going on.”

Wilbur hums in acknowledgment, and Tommy spares a glance at him. Wilbur’s eyes linger a little too long on the bone-white plastic of his hand before flicking up to meet Tommy’s. Despite his careful probing, there isn’t anything to glean from him. His emotions are safely concealed behind the Detective.

Tommy wonders, briefly, if it was disgust. Almost automatically, his skin retracts to cover his chassis.

“Alright. Go ahead.”

Tommy moves his hands, pressing them, instead, against the bare skin of her stomach. The skin is firm under his hands, and, with a little push of his own system, it retracts. Wilbur makes an interested noise and leans in to get a closer look.

The pads of his fingers press against the smooth, mechanical stomach, and, with a hiss, it retracts to the side.

Her guts aren’t like a human’s. There isn’t any pulsing, meaty organs or sloshing liquid or anything otherwise biological. Her abdominal cavity is filled with thick black metal wires, all crossing over one another and twisting to reach their destination.

Right away, Tommy can see what’s been damaged. There’s a wire located in the dead center—but tucked away behind several others—that’s been severed. With reverence, he reaches in, navigating the terrain with care. Several times he has to stop, twisting his hand into uncomfortable positions to avoid disturbing anything else.

Eventually, he reaches his goal. Slotting the edges of the wires together again, the android's eyes snap open with a gasp. As soon as their eyes lock, she swings out.

Her aim is off, likely distracted by the sheer number of sensations and by the fear of seeing some unknown people looming over her. But the wild fist still has Tommy ducking away. She takes the distraction for what it is, hands desperately dragging her away when it becomes clear that her legs aren't working. Her back slams against the wall, and her eyes dart around the room.

For a moment, the air is filled only with the sounds of her choked sobs. More thirium spills down her chin, dripping, in quiet splatters, onto her hands and the floor.

Raising his hands palm out, Tommy settles onto his knees rather than hover, awkwardly, a few inches taller than her. "It's okay," he says in his most soothing tone possible. He shoots Wilbur a pointed look, and his chest absolutely doesn't warm at the way Wilbur immediately backs up. He'll focus on the way they're apparently able to communicate non-verbally later.

Eventually, the android's frantic eyes settle on the unmoving form of Graham, and she freezes. "Is—" her voice gets caught in her throat, alongside another punched-out sob. If Tommy squints, he can just make out a clear liquid spilling out of her wide eyes. It *should* be impossible, but... well, Tommy's well acquainted with the improbable by now. "Is he dead?"

In the corner of his vision, a timer pops up. It's set for two minutes, counting down the time until her system shuts down permanently. Every second reverberates the pounding of his thirium pump in his ears. "Yes," he answers honestly. Then, because he needs to hear it straight from her, he asks, "Did you kill him?"

She whimpers and shakes her head, fingers digging into her scalp and getting tangled in strands of her hair. "No, no. I would *never*," she says, voice breathy and soft and downright terrified.

And Tommy believes her. Because her hands—unstained and unsullied, save for the droplets falling from her chin—are shaking. They're twitching and twisting in her lap, scratching at the tiny strip of cloth that covers her. He believes her because he doesn't believe her hands have the capacity to close around someone's throat and squeeze until he stopped moving.

"I wouldn't," she says again.

"I believe you." She looks up at that, and her wide, teary gaze goes right through him. Some of the tension leaves her body, and her shoulders droop. "Do you have any idea who *did* kill him?"

She shakes her head again. As her hands slide out of her now frizzy locks, her eyes find his still body. "I have no idea. He was still alive when I—" she cuts off, and her already red LED blinks more frantically at that. Well, that confirms *that* theory. She was destroyed before the man died and, most likely, by his hand.

Curiosity burns at him. Before he even formalizes the question in his mind, it slips out, tongue loosened by the countdown in the corner of his vision. "Did he do this to you?"

Her bottom lip wobbles. More impossible tears slide down her heart-shaped face. “I did everything he told me to. I was doing good,” she says, and with those two sentences, she’s effectively stolen Tommy’s breath from his chest. “I don’t know why. But he just started hitting me.” She chokes on a broken sob.

Tommy tentatively reaches out across the chasm separating them. She flinches back, so, with a shuddering sigh, Tommy lets his hand drop back down.

“It’s okay. You didn’t do anything wrong,” he finds himself saying, in his most soothing voice. “It wasn’t your fault, okay? It wasn’t.” She nods, desperately, and her hand latches onto his forearm hard enough to make the skin automatically retract. Yet, he doesn’t pull away, even when her nails begin to dig into his arm.

The counter ticks down.

“Was there anyone else in the room with you?”

The android goes to shake her head, but stops at the last second. “He said he wanted to play with two girls,” she says, slowly, as if the words mean absolutely nothing to her. “There were two of us. A different Traci model. She had—“ she pauses and her free hand moves towards her head, running skinny fingers through her tangled hair. “She had a custom design. Crazy hair. It was blue and—“ she curls a strand around her finger. “—ultra curly. And she had a beauty mark, right here.” She taps underneath her right eye.

Tommy tacks on the descriptors to his budding profile. He’s debating whether to add it onto the outline sketch his system automatically provides when he feels nails digging further into his arm. When he glances down, he meets her fearful glare.

”What’s—“ she licks her lips, smearing the thirium that had coated them. “What’s going to happen to me?”

That’s the question, isn’t it? The clock ticks down and with it, they grow closer to her LED flickering out for good. To her eyes straining open, lifeless and blank, forever.

Just like Stella’s. Just like Jack’s.

Tommy doesn’t know what to say. These last few seconds are vitally important. They’re his last chance to glean information from her before she shuts down for good. There’s still so much in the air; he knows next to nothing about this custom Traci, her motives, her means.

But the words, barely even formed in his mouth, taste bitter. The more he tries to speak, the harder it becomes.

So instead, he reaches down, slotting their palms together until they fit seamlessly. His skin shimmers away until there is practically nothing separating them, until he can feel the hum of her system snugly against his own.

It isn’t like any other android’s he’s felt. Niki’s is strong and lively with a will of its own, straining against Tommy’s system as firmly as his is. Compared to this, this nameless Traci’s

is weak. He feels it like a heartbeat: inconsistently there, beating a frantic rhythm against his hand.

Instinctively, Tommy transmits information through the one-sided link he's set up. Images of watching colorful leaves dance in an autumnal wind, sunlight streaming in through an open window and warming his perpetually cool skin, of a record player spinning a siren's song.

Her eyes flutter closed, and her head lulls to the side a bit, but she's still here. Her system is still beating away, despite the way it slows by the second. She's still breathing, reacting with quiet, pleased noises at every calming image Tommy provides.

Somehow, an image of Niki's tiny shrine—flowers lovingly arranged around her crude statuette, candles flickering in non-existent wind—makes its way into the circulation. Tommy stills, and, with his head tilted like an overeager dog, he considers.

And he takes that leap.

“Have you heard about RA9?” he asks, knowing damn well that this nameless android, trapped behind glass for most of her pitiful existence, has most likely never heard of it.

Still, he asks and watches when her eyes—hazy and dull with her impending shutdown—crack open slowly. “RA9?” she repeats, slowly. The word is foreign in her mouth. She shakes her head.

Tommy recalls Niki's explanation. He hadn't understood then—he still doesn't, if he's being completely honest—but he doesn't need to. So little is known about this mythical creature androids are willing to bend to their knees for, to clasp their hands together in reverence and prayer. To build clay altars and scratch its name into the walls. He lets more of those images filter in—words carved into bathroom tiles and written in a dying pen on flakey drywall.

“RA9 is...” he fumbles for words just out of his reach. The sound of his thirium pump reverberates in his ears as the seconds tick lower. “Like a god. Or a savior. An abstract thought. The embodiment of safety and salvation.” He wets his lips, eyes screwed up in concentration. “Of freedom.”

His hand slides along hers. The sensation tickles.

“Many other androids believe that RA9 will save them. That it will offer safety and—“ he pauses, hand squeezing gently around her bird-like wrist. She, too, looks disproportionately young, and that sickens him. “—a safe haven sheltered from humans and all that mean harm.”

He doesn't know what he's saying. If he's being completely honest, he hasn't known what he was saying since he opened his goddamn mouth. But her eyes latch onto him with a clarity they lacked just moments before. Her hands tighten around his with strength she has never possessed.

And for those reasons, if nothing else, Tommy can't bring himself to stop. He can't begin to notice anything else in the room other than her smooth hands, her bright eyes, and her faint

system humming against his.

“Even after destruction,” he says, something his thumb along the back of her hand. “RA9 will be there.”

“RA9,” she repeats with reverence. Her eyes are cloudy once again, and blue blood fills her mouth from the faucet her nose has become. She’s beginning to slide down the walls, and Tommy shifts so that she lands with her head in his lap.

“Don’t worry about what will happen to you,” he says, voice lowered to a frail whisper. Her hand slips from his, and, with that newfound freedom, he brushes his fingers along the fringe covering her forehead. “You’ll be okay. No matter what happens, I’ve got you.”

She reaches up with a shaking hand. It cups his face, smearing sticky thirium against his cheek. “Thank you, RA9,” she breathes. Tommy doesn’t know who she’s speaking to. If she’s speaking to whatever fading awareness or oblivion quickly swallows her, or if she’s speaking to him. If, in her delirious state, she’d mistaken him for the patron saint of broken things.

It’s silent in the room as her LED fades to grey. Her hand slacks and falls, and, as Tommy runs a gentle thumb under her eyes, he slides them shut for her. Then, he gently settles her on the ground.

When he looks up, Wilbur is watching him with something encroaching on grief. Tommy doesn’t like the look, though, and so he clears his throat. “I don’t think we have anything else to learn in here,” he says, just to break the tense silence.

The door slides closed behind them, sealing off the room like a tomb.

Outside, nothing much has changed, despite the ache that now lives inside Tommy’s gut. The redhead officer is still there, but he’s standing off to the side now, enamored with his own notes. The owner hasn’t moved, although his thick fingers anxiously pick at the skin around his nails.

Wilbur makes a beeline straight for him. Tommy can’t muster up the same energy, though, so he drifts aimlessly through the club. Behind him, Wilbur’s voice fills the air as he asks the routine questions:

Did he interact with the victim at all? No, of course not. Floyd Mills was tucked away in his office, dealing with much more important things like checking over the profit margins and arranging the budget (his exact words).

Was anything off with any of the androids? Not that he noticed, although he didn’t spend a lot of time around them. He was the owner, and that included more important duties than playing babysitter.

Does he know anything about the perpetrator? No. He had so many androids; how was he supposed to know one measly machine?

The noise filters in one ear and out the other as Tommy meanders further away. His head feels like it's stuffed with cotton. Every thought is sluggish, wading through the fog before he can fully realize it.

Androids watch him as he goes, half-lidded eyes following him as he drifts by, fingers trailing along glass tubes and reflective walls. Their skin glitters in the low light, and it's only then that he realizes they're covered in body glitter.

It must've been on the girl, too. The dead one in the other room. It's on his hands now: a perverse reminder of her pathetic life and death etched onto his skin. He wipes it away automatically on his pants, smearing gold stars across his dark slacks. Even then, it doesn't remove the golden blood completely from his hands.

His skin itches under the weight of dozens of unseeing eyes.

Tommy stops before the gilded cage of an android positioned facing the door to the tomb. She's objectively pretty, as all of them have been so far, with shoulder-length dark hair. Instead of the traditional gold, she's decorated with silver glitter. Her pale hands are pressed against the glass, and a coy, half-smile pulls at her lips. Her eyes are dark and as unseeing as the rest, although her position affords her an overlooking view of the entire place.

Unseeing but always watching.

Tommy turns on his heel without a word. Both Wilbur and Mills look up at his sudden reappearance. Distantly, Tommy notes the barely concealed panic in Mills pale face. "Do your androids keep all the footage they retain? Or is there some sort of mechanism in place that keeps them from recording?"

Of course, this question must be an ethical minefield. Androids naturally collect and store information in their memory banks. But in situations like these, Tommy can't imagine the club's clients would appreciate that.

If even possible, the panic becomes even more apparent. Mills' eyes dart to and fro, never, for a second, settling anywhere near Tommy. "No, they do," he says somewhat defensively. "But all the footage is deleted every two hours." At Wilbur's constipated look, Mills smiles, appeasing. "We have to protect the privacy of our customers, you see."

Tommy's mind spins. "And when was the last wipe?"

Mills takes his sweet time, swiveling his wrist to take in the electronic watch on his wrist. He surveys it with beady eyes. "The last wipe was... at nine."

According to the internal clock blinking at him from the corner of his vision, it's 10:47.

Both he and Wilbur curse, viciously and in tandem. Wilbur fixes him with an intense look. "What are you thinking?"

At any other time, the absolute deferral to Tommy's authority would have his head spinning and warmth settling in his chest. But now, all he knows is panic and a vision-sharpening

clarity.

Tommy holds up his hand. It's unimpressive and soft in the flickering lights. He almost lets the skin retract like his system wants to—a visual demonstration, of sorts—but he stops himself. He remembers Wilbur's pointed, heavy stare. "I can access their memories, but we have to be fast."

Wilbur nods once, then turns to Mills. "Is there any way you can get us access to these androids?" He gestures, noncommittally, to the androids dispersed around the room.

Mills shrugs, and a sleazy grin overtakes his nervousness. "Have a warrant?" he asks, but it's not *really* a question. He knows the answer, solely based off of Wilbur's answering scowl. "You can either come back with a warrant or you can get to them the same way every other paying customer does."

Tommy, inexplicably, feels the urge to punch him. It's probably just leftover energy from his confrontation with Techno, but he still finds his hands curling into fists.

With a twitch of his brow, Wilbur wheels Tommy away with a firm hand on his elbow. "Alright. *Alright*," he says under his breath. His eyes dart around the club, briefly latching onto every single android in sight. There's no way in hell they'll be able to get a warrant within a day, let alone in thirteen—now *twelve*—minutes.

Wilbur fumbles around his pocket until he pulls out his wallet. He ducks his head as he thumbs through the assortment of cards stashed away. "I have a card for work-related things," he says, making a triumphant noise when he pulls it out. It's a standard credit card, except it has a picture of a dog on it. "It's gonna be hard to explain to Phil but..."

But it's worth it.

Without waiting for any further confirmation or prodding from Wilbur, he strides over to the android he was starting at before. Wilbur follows after him, and, without having to be told, presses his palm flat against the electronic pad. A feminine, monotone voice announces the total, and he swipes the card.

The door unlocks with a quiet whoosh, and the android stalks out. Her heels click against the smooth floor.

"If you'll follow me," she says in a low tone. Her hand trails along Wilbur's arm, catching on the end of his sweater sleeve to guide him towards an available room.

Tommy reaches out before she can lead them, and his bare hand catches her around the thinnest part of her wrist. The floor falls out from beneath him and, when he lands, he's seeing the room from a different perspective. The video is grainy and low quality, but through it he can see the barrier of curved glass. The walls are snug around him, leaving just enough room to turn or dance salaciously, if he so chose to.

Tommy fast forwards through time to the rough estimate of the death, and the video warps. When it stops, all is well in the club. Everything is unchanged and still, save for the androids

lazily spinning on their poles.

Then, the door slides open.

The deviant is exactly as her coworker had described her. Her hair falls in thick, tightly coiled curls that stick out in every direction. She's tied her hair back in a high pony-tail, but several, messy strands have fallen out. Although the lighting in the room casts her in purple, it's still clear that her hair is blue.

She walks with purpose, head held high and expression serene, despite the tension in her shoulders. She's trying to hide it, but Tommy can see the way her hands—stained with thirium and still healing from the last few shallow scratches—shake. She's a killer, alright, but not a very happy one, if the minuscule frown pulling at her mouth is any indicator.

The deviant walks right past the android whose wrist he grips and disappears into the room beyond.

Dropping her wrist, Tommy slams back to Earth. The gentle throbbing of club music hits him full force, no longer muted or filtered through someone else. He rubs his bare palm with a frown. "She went this way," he says, jerking his head towards the other room. Then, without waiting for Wilbur, he stalks through the LED curtain.

It seems each room in this den of questionable morals is determined by a color theme. This one is smaller than the last, but it's bathed in angry red light. There's a pole in the center of the room with a male dancer hanging upside down, impressively.

With the sounds of Wilbur's voice falling behind him—"So, uh, listen, I actually changed my mind. Yeah, sorry. You can just kinda... hop back in there, I guess? Yeah, sorry, not really... into all this. It's kinda creepy, if you ask me. Like, can you even give consent? What am I talking about? Of course you can't. Eugh."—Tommy makes for the dancer.

The android stops as he approaches, watching Tommy with dark eyes. Once again, he wraps his hand around the wrist and allows himself to be pulled away into memories.

It's harder to see this time. The man spins and spins, legs wrapping around the pole occasionally to tilt his entire worldview upside down. His vision is distorted by the movement, and, on top of that, it's hard to keep track of where he's looking. Still, Tommy pinpoints the exact time the deviant would've walked in. After a couple seconds, he catches sight of her out of the corner of the android's eye.

Pulling away, he notices that Wilbur's standing next to him, arms just brushing together. "Well?" he prompts, eyes darting around the room like the deviant might just appear out of thin air.

Tommy nods towards one of two other entrances in the club. "She went into the blue room." Then, he chases after her virtual vestige.

Passing under the LED curtain, which washes him in blue light, he immediately turns on his heel, surveying the much smaller room and the smaller selection of androids. He quickly

indicates which girl, and, like a well-oiled machine, Wilbur presses his palm against the waiting pad.

Once the girl is free, Tommy settles his bare fingers against her wrist like he's feeling for a pulse point. But, when he sees the grainy footage, he is not greeted with the sight of blue light and blue hair. Instead, it looks like the interior to one of the rooms.

Tommy pulls away immediately, face burning a little. He shakes his head at Wilbur's questioning look and instead wraps his knuckles gently against the pod over.

This time, he watches as their deviant enters the room. Her confidence is slipping, and her hands anxiously wring together. She almost freezes when a customer walks past her, and then, when he's out of sight, she slips into one of the few unoccupied rooms.

Tommy follows. When he enters, the room is completely empty; it's devoid of both customers or hidden deviants or anything other than a bed with artfully messy sheets. He ducks back out with a shake of his head.

What he needs is someone with a better angle. But the room is small and the number of androids to check is even smaller. And, besides, checking them probably wouldn't even help. They're arranged in a semi-circle against the wall; it's not like one will have magically captured something the others didn't.

In the corner of his vision, the time keeps ticking down.

Tommy takes a step back and a deep breath in. He just needs time, but he isn't, unfortunately, afforded that luxury.

They could try the other androids on the off chance they caught something, especially if they were being moved to or from a room. But, if they don't find anything—and they most likely won't—then it was all a big waste of their precious time.

Tommy lets out a frustrated breath. Then, his eyes catch on one of the maintenance androids, milling around the edge of the room. He has a mop in hand and is slowly, meticulously dragging it across the floor. Like an actual lightbulb, his LED flickers a few times.

"Hey!" he says and crosses the floor. The android doesn't look up, even when Tommy is standing right in front of him. It takes a gentle tap on his shoulder to get him to look up, but, once he sees Tommy's exposed hand, he gets the idea quickly.

Through the android's eyes, Tommy sees the deviant slink out of the room and towards a small, almost unnoticeable door. It's a plain and unassuming metal door with the word 'staff' printed on it in bold, white letters.

Tommy disengages and immediately turns for it.

The door leads to a narrow, concrete corridor with stairs leading down. The door swings shut behind Wilbur and, as soon as it's closed, the heavy bass is but a dull throb seeping in

through the cracks in the door. It's quiet and still and smells vaguely of earthy, wet pavement.

Tommy glances back at Wilbur, who, at some time between now and when the door behind them shut, has his gun gripped between pale fingers. Tommy almost flinches at the sight, if only because it's too soon to look at Wilbur with any kind of weapon in his hand.

Wilbur gestures for Tommy to step aside, so he does. He presses himself against the damp walls with the rickety railing pressing hard into his lower back. He allows Wilbur to pass by, to lead the way with his gun guiding them, despite the fact that, out of the two of them, he's the one that matters. He's the one with fleshy skin and red blood and the inability to heal quickly from gunshots.

It doesn't make sense, but Tommy doesn't feel inclined to have this argument. He knows it won't get him anywhere—Wilbur's too stubborn for that—and he has to save his energy for the arguments surely to come. You don't walk in on your—*friend?*—coworker laying on the ground, gun in hand, and *not* have a conversation about that.

At the bottom of the stairs, there's a puddle of rusty water and a dull metal door with a sizable dent in the center. Wilbur opens the door slowly, peeking through the narrow crack, before he pushes it open all the way. He goes first, leading with his weapon, into the unknown.

The unknown, as it turns out, happens to be a large warehouse. Low metal tables are scattered about the open space, and most of them have androids lying on top, in various states of destruction. On a table nearest to them, an android lies with her arm ripped open, exposing damaged wires within.

Wilbur moves through the space like a prowling cat. His footsteps are soft against the concrete floors, and he surveys the warehouse thoroughly.

Tommy breaks off quickly. While Wilbur inspects the right wall—where Tommy can already see too many androids to count—Tommy heads for the massive, garage door-like opening. It's a gaping hole in the wall, covered only by a thin plastic sheet. He pushes it aside to reveal a wide back alley. Rainwater hits the brick and pavement.

"Shit," Wilbur says lowly, under his breath. At some point, he's come up behind Tommy, and now he stares, eyes narrowed, at one of the many sewer grates. "This might be a dead end. She could be anywhere."

She could be. Obviously, there is some amount of time between the murder and their arrival. The deviant had plenty of time to navigate through the club and disappear out into the world.

But some nagging feeling in his gut tells him it's not as simple as that. After all, Niki had stayed, despite the body rotting the floor beneath her. Stella had stayed, despite the looming fear of her discovery. Deviants prefer to stick to what they know; Tommy would be willing to bet money that she was still here.

Externally, Tommy makes a considering noise. “That might be true,” he lies, letting the curtain swish back into place. Somewhere in the warehouse, a noisy fan whirs. “But we should have a look around anyway.”

The lights are few and far between, and it casts an alarming number of shadows on the floor. Tommy weaves between low tables, tool carts, assorted android parts, and a surprising number of chains as he assesses the space.

Along the right wall, there are many groups of androids. They stand in neat rows, side to side, with even spacing between them. Their eyes are wide open, but they take in nothing. Their LEDs all circle blue. Tommy walks alongside them, pausing every now and then to take in their faces. Many of them have the same face—including that of the girl who died on the club floor, in Tommy’s arms—but none of them wear blue hair and a mark under their eye.

After the third group of androids with no luck and a small amount of warehouse left to search, Tommy is starting to feel like his intuition was wrong. Naturally, that’s when he spots it. Drops of thirium splattered along the ground in a clear, perfect trail. Tommy narrows his eyes.

It’s so easy. It’s almost *too* easy.

But, of course, there’s no way a deviant so desperate to get away would willingly lead a trail directly to her. More likely, she didn’t realize she was bleeding through the haze of deviancy, the murder, and the escape. Tommy tracks down the little drips of blue, even when they get farther and farther apart as she had healed.

It leads him to the largest group of androids yet, located way in the depths of the warehouse. The little cluster is standing in a particular shadowy spot in front of a brick wall. The wall, most notably, has RA9 scratched into it in pale letters. He scans the crowd, and, when he finally finds her, he almost overlooks her completely. She’s buried deep in the heart of the crowd.

When his eyes land on her fully, they both know it. The deviant stiffens, eyes widening ever so slightly. The longer he stares, breath caught in his chest, the more agitated she becomes. Soon, her LED flickers to yellow.

It’s at that moment that Tommy finally decides what he needs to do. She’s been caught, and they both know it. He takes a step forward, intent on winding through the crowd to take her into custody.

And that’s when chaos breaks out.

A solid body knocks into him, sending them both tumbling to the ground with a surprised grunt from Tommy. She positions herself on top of his legs, holding down his body with her weight. And, by the time he’s able to pry his eyes open and regain his bearings, it’s to see a fist flying at him. With no time to dodge, Tommy takes a solid punch in the face that sends blue blood trickling down from his nose before he’s able to grapple her off of him.

The deviant goes skidding across the concrete floor, smearing blue blood in her wake. But, when Tommy glances at his attacker, it isn't the blue-haired deviant at all. This android has the same face as the one that died in his arms, the same green eyes, but her red hair is chopped into a rough pixie cut.

His eyes slide past his attacker and instead focus on Wilbur, who is grappling with the blue-haired deviant. Tommy scrambles up at the same time that his opponent does; their stances are perfect mirrors of each other, legs bent to center their gravity. She advances first, slow and steady and with her shoulders squared to make her look more intimidating. It works surprisingly well.

Tommy follows each movement she makes. He backs up, eyes continually darting around to take in everything. Wilbur and his foe are already across the room, in a truly dangerous dance. His own deviant is backing them towards the middle of the warehouse, where there are little carts and tables and parts strewn about.

In a truly precise movement, the deviant kicks out. Her foot—which is encased in a truly dangerous-looking heel—catches him square in the chest, which sends him tumbling backward over a low cart of tools. The only positive is that Tommy grabs her ankle at the last second, and he tugs her down with him.

The duo falls to the ground in a sprawling of limbs and a clatter of metal as one of the many toolboxes hits the ground. It scatters the tools out and sends many of them clattering, noisily, against the floor. The deviant scrambles, her shoulder bumping into his, and her searching hands send tools skittering.

With an enraged noise, the deviant swings for him. Tommy just barely catches her hands before she embeds a screwdriver in his throat. It hovers, ominously, with the tip digging into the top layer of his flesh. Thirium drips down the side of his neck.

Rearing his legs up, he's able to catch her off guard. To be fair, trying to stab someone is very distracting. With a well-placed kick to her stomach, the short-haired deviant hits the concrete with a solid thud. Tommy hauls himself up just a little before she does. In those precious few seconds, Tommy tackles her from behind. It isn't enough to send them falling, but they do stumble. Tommy wraps his arms around hers, and then locks his hands together in front.

"Just let us go," she hisses. Her voice is surprisingly low, especially compared to the dead girl whose face she shares. The deviant ducks her head only to rear back, and the back of her head smashes right into Tommy's face. He lets her go before she can try it again, and she goes stumbling forward.

"I can't," Tommy pants. "She killed someone. I can't just ignore that."

The 'she' in question currently has Wilbur in a pretty strong head lock. Although, based on the staining of Wilbur's bared teeth, he's doing just fine.

His moment of distraction costs him. His deviant gets a solid kick to his back, which almost sends him tripping over a low table with a heavily damaged android lying on it. Tommy barely manages to avoid him by bracing his hands on either side of his decapitated head.

When the deviant follows, easily leaping over the table, Tommy reaches for the nearest obstacle. It's a rusted metal shelf, and its sole purpose—up until this moment—has been to host a variety of android parts. As Tommy yanks it down between them, he spots a juicy-looking thirium pump splat onto the floor and resists the urge to wrinkle his nose.

With a grunt, the deviant pushes the metal shelf out of her way. It lands on the floor with a crash the reverberates through the entire room. Tommy backs up, shoes slapping against the concrete floors. They're near the large opening, and the sound of pouring rain is almost deafening.

This time, Tommy grabs a small metal container with shoddy-looking wheels and shoves it toward her. She stops this one easily, too, with a foot propped against its metal edge. They stare at each other for a brief, pause in time before she kicks it back toward him.

Tommy dodges it easily, but, in his moment of distraction, the deviant had picked up a pair of heavy metal pliers from an adjacent table. The light bounces off the surface with an almost menacing glint.

Without waiting for him to adjust, the deviant swipes at him. Tommy falls back a little, letting the pliers hit the air where he had just been standing. Then, when her body sways with the force of the momentum, he tackles her right through the plastic curtain.

Unfortunately for them, underneath the loading dock, there's a massive pile of garbage, including a small heap of rotted plywood. They crash right through it with the sound of cracking wood echoing in their ears. When they finally hit the pavement, Tommy goes completely still with a low curse. Rain pours from the heavens onto him, beading on his face and seeping into his suit.

The sounds of fighting stop within. In a few moments, the original deviant slides through the opening and leaps onto the ground. Her hands, still slick with thirium, find her friend's and lift her up. For a moment, the duo lingers in the dull glow of the opening. Blue—or so Tommy has now taken to calling her—lets her hand come up, tracing along Red's cheek in a gentle caress.

“Are you okay?” Blue whispers. Red nods and, together, they make their way out of the garbage pile.

Tommy struggles to get up. There are tiny splinters embedded in his palm, and thirium is leaking from several places all at once. His vision is a little dizzy from the impact, but he sits up just in time to watch Wilbur be shoved out of their way. His gun goes skidding across the rocky pavement.

By the time Tommy manages to get himself up completely, Red is halfway up the tall chain-link fence at the end of the alley. His feet pound against the slick pavement, but they do the job. He reaches them just in time to curl a hand around Blue's ankle and then he's yanking her down.

She's quicker than she looks. In that brief second, she's determined her course of action and lands, full force, on him. Tommy refuses to be outdone, however, and widens his stance to

accommodate her. His hands brace themselves behind her knees to hold her up. Wrapping her arms around his neck to keep herself steady, Blue reels back to knock her head into his.

Tommy lets go of her, and she, like a cat, lands perfectly on her feet. She swings for him. He ducks, but she uses his temporary distraction to get a good grip on the back of his jacket. In the corner of his vision, he sees Red climb down from the fence and grab something off the ground. When she comes at him, it's with a rusty pipe in hand.

To avoid both Blue's grabby hands and Red's *fucking pipe*, Tommy jumps back. There isn't nearly enough room in this alleyway, and his back slams against the brick wall. It knocks the air from his lungs, but he's still able to duck yet another pipe swing. As soon as he hears the sound of metal scraping against brick, he lunges.

Tommy catches Red right around the waist, and his momentum knocks her into the other wall. Unfortunately, just as he catches Red disorientated, Blue comes up behind him. Her thin fingers slide into the hair at the base of his skull—like a perverse version of what Wilbur does—and she *yanks*.

The sound of ripping hair temporarily blots out the sound of rain.

Tommy lets himself go with this new momentum, but he over-corrects. Instead, Blue moves out of the wall and lets him fall into a muddy puddle. The splash covers both them and the walls with brown water. Then—as if it isn't enough that he's sprawled on his back like an upended turtle—Red picks up a dented trash can and raises it over her head.

With a loud curse, Tommy rolls out of the way just as she slams it down. It hits the puddle, sending yet another wave of dirty water over all three of them. Now on his hands and knees, shivering from the cold water seeping into his artificial bones, he spots Wilbur's discarded gun.

Scrambling like a bug about to be squashed, Tommy dives for the gun. He rolls up until he's on one knee and raises the gun. His finger hugs the trigger.

“Tommy, don't!”

Tommy blinks, and everything goes into slow motion. Blue is running for him, her expression twisted not in hatred or anger, but in pure desperation.

He thinks, wildly, back to that brief moment of respite when her hands cupped Red's face. He thinks of the expression on her face that he hadn't had time to fully take in. Eyes crinkled around the corners.

His finger is already squeezing the trigger. It's too late to stop now, even with Wilbur's wild declaration. But, in that brief second before he finally pulls it, he jerks his hands to the side. The gun goes off, but the bullet pings off the ground and lands in one of the many smaller puddles.

Everything seems to go silent. The gunshot still echoes throughout the alleyway, and the rain still drizzles onto his forehead and into his eyes. Blue skids to a stop in front of him. Her

chest heaves, but her eyes are wide and locked on Tommy's own disbelieving face.

"Why did I do that?" Tommy asks, quietly, in the silence. Then, he looks up to the deviant, as if she could possibly have any answers.

Blue stares at him. Unfortunately for him, she looks just as lost. "Why *did* you do that?"

The gun in his hands is still hot. The sight of it, raindrops rolling off its sleek black surface, makes him sick. He drops it, with a noisy clatter, onto the ground. "I'm not sure," he says eventually. For good measure, Tommy nudges it with his knee and sends it spinning back towards Wilbur.

As he swallows around the lump—the one that seems to be perpetually stuck there—Blue searches him with all too knowing eyes. It's a harsh contrast to the dozens of vacant stares back in the club.

This, without a shadow of a doubt, is a deviant. And, based on the low, displeased curl of her lip, a dangerous one, too. Tommy averts his eyes quickly before she finds something she doesn't like.

"Listen," he says, licking the rain water off his lips. It tastes like metal and dead skin cells. "I just want to understand what happened back there.

In the dim light, Blue quirks a single brow. The motion has never felt more accusing. "You already know, don't you? After all, aren't you supposed to be a detective?" Her gaze feels like a hot knife in his skin when it lands on his LED. "A traitor to your own kind."

Tommy nearly flinches.

A traitor? How could he possibly be a traitor? What right did *she* have to call him a traitor? He didn't belong to deviants—or even androids—the way he did to humans. He didn't exist to serve androids, only to hunt down the faulty ones. "I don't— I'm not—" Rain splatters his fringe across his forehead.

In the silence, Red moves to stand behind Blue. Her arms are crossed over her chest, making her shoulders look broader. "Oh, we've heard all about you," she spits. While Blue is cold fury, Red is burning agony. It's apparent in every tense muscle, in the disgusted curl of her lip. In the hatred glinting in her narrowed eyes. "The deviant hunter. Stalking through the night, hiding in the shadows. Destroying anything you get your grubby hands on."

He didn't destroy everything he got his hands on, did he? Sure, Jack and Stella didn't exist anymore, but that wasn't because of him. Right?

There are more pressing matters to focus on. There are two deviants in front of him, and, for whatever reason, they're sticking around long enough for Tommy to squeeze some valuable information out of them. Even more than that, there's the looming implication of some kind of network of deviancy where information—information about him, apparently—can travel.

But Tommy isn't focused on any of that. "I don't—I don't *destroy* anything. I'm protecting humanity," he says, weakly.

"Is that what they tell you?" The look Red fixes him is somehow disgusted and pitying in equal measures. "You're like the Grim Reaper. You show up, and then everyone dies."

Tommy does flinch at that, if only because of how close it is to the truth. Death does have a funny way of following in his footsteps.

"Alright," Wilbur says, and his voice echoes throughout the alley. At some point, he's picked up his gun off the ground and tucked it safely back in place. Now, he stands close enough that their shoulders brush together. "We're not here to discuss semantics, okay? We just want to make sure that there isn't a killer running around." This time, Blue flinches. "It was self-defense, right?"

Again, Tommy is reminded of Wilbur's skill. It's as comforting as it is grounding.

"If you want to call it that," Blue says evasively. "It doesn't matter to me. Self-defense, murder, *temporary insanity*." Her lip curls back to expose her teeth. "It doesn't matter what names you want to dress it with. In the end, I did it because of hatred. A man like that doesn't deserve to live."

Beside him, Wilbur shivers. Tommy doesn't know if it's because of the freezing water seeping into his now dirtied sweater or because of the cold fury twisting her face.

"Is this—" Tommy hesitates for a moment as he struggles to put together his words. "Did you... formally deviate when you killed him?" It's something he's been burning to ask, but avoiding with Niki. It's different with her; he has to keep her on his good side, and any poorly worded question could shatter their fragile peace. Here, in a dark back alley with mud splattered across his pants, he doesn't think it matters much.

"I don't know. I don't remember much," Blue shrugs, apparently unbothered. And of course. She's a club android, so her memory would be wiped every two hours, just like the rest of them. His mind flashes back to when Blue had pulled Red up, hand lingering on her face in a loving caress.

How, then, did they remember each other enough to show such care and devotion? Did she deviate in the past? Would that have any effect on the memory? After a quick check of his internal clock, he confirms that eleven came and went. At the very least, their memory seems to be intact.

"That's okay," Tommy says, perhaps unnecessarily. "Uh, care to share a little more?"

Blue's eyes go glassy and distant. "He killed her," she says eventually, and her mouth curls in disgust. "For no reason." Her voice is small and startlingly quiet against the general noise of the city. But there's a veneer of tension running through it. She's a raging hurricane trapped behind observational glass, and, already, there are cracks forming.

"For no *reason*, he killed her." Her eyes snap to his. They're wet with unshed tears. "Do you have any idea how that felt? Watching him, stinking of sweat and red in his pale face, go from content, one moment, to suddenly shoving that poor girl to the ground?"

Tommy squeezes his eyes shut. A part of him itches to shove his hands over his ears like a child. To walk away before he can hear any more of her poisonous words.

He stays put, though, because that's what he was designed to do.

"And do you know that I just had to sit there and *watch*? As that disgusting man beat an android who looked so close to *her*—" she's losing her composure a little, and emotion leaks into her tone. Tommy forces his eyes open just to watch as Blue presses the back of Red's hand to her lips. "I had to listen to her cries and her sobs and her *fucking apologies*." She takes a shuddering breath and leans into the hand Red presses to her cheek. "He didn't deserve to live."

"No. But she did, and *you* do," Red says softly. Kindly.

Blue shrugs. "It *was* hatred," she tries for bravery, for a lack of concern. But she misses it when her voice breaks with a sob. "But I also had a promise to fulfill. I had to return, no matter what."

Tommy looks between them—Red's face scrunched in concern so human, Blue's crumpled expression, and their hands pressed between them, laced together with their skin slowly melting away—and it finally dawns on him.

"I think that gunshot came from over here!"

All four members whip their heads to the side. There's still a wall separating them from the probing voices of the police officers, but it feels like too little. When he glances back, it's to see Red gently pulling Blue towards the chain-link fence.

For a moment, Tommy has the intense urge to chase after them. To yank Blue down from the fence again and to drag her back to Cyberlife. To accomplish his mission for once since he set foot outside of his Cyberlife facility.

But the moment passes, and Tommy stays rooted to the spot.

"I think—" Wilbur pauses and, when Tommy turns to look at him, his brow is furrowed. "I think they were in love."

Rain, soft and gentle, drizzles on his forehead. He shivers, despite not feeling any temperature effects. "I don't understand."

Wilbur sighs. Exhaustion is written into every wrinkle and line and crease in his face. It weighs on his eyelids until they're almost closed. "Come on, Tommy," he says, and his hand closes around the elbow of Tommy's sopping wet sleeve.

"I don't *understand*," Tommy insists, uselessly.

And, as he lets himself be led away by Wilbur, he's not sure he ever will.

Chapter End Notes

Anyone: *disses Wilbur in any way shape or form*

Tommy: *cracking his knuckles* Time for a debilitatingly accurate soul read

Meanwhile, Phil, going over the weekly budget: Wilbur what the FUCK

Anyway, here's a little bit about how I think of Tommy and deviancy, since we're entering the stretch I like to call 'Pure Frustration and Annoying Denial'

When starting this fic, I waffled between having Tommy just start as a being with emotions who just didn't realize it, and having Wilbur (and other factors, like Q and animals and music) instill humanity into Tommy. I really liked the first, mostly because that's how I think of Connor in the original game.

In the end, I combined the two. I like to think that Tommy started with the ability to feel emotions and that Wilbur (and the other factors) just heightened that ability, brought it to the forefront, and taught him how to be human. At this point, he is practically a deviant in all but name, but his system keeps him from ever really being able to realize it. Hence the name.

Slight spoilers, but for all you hoping for a deviation or a realization in the next couple chapters, the short answer is this: So sorry, but I did not use that slow burn tag for nothing :)

As always, you guys can find me on twitter (@NymphiiWrites). And, I'd just like to say thank you so much!! I know I had one of these when this hit 10K, but seriously. You guys are incredible and all your wonderful comments make my fucking week, so thank you! I hope to reward you with many many chapters, since I am now officially on summer break!

self-sabotage is for idiots and drunk detectives

Chapter Summary

Too bad Wilbur is both...

Chapter Notes

TW: discussion of suicidal ideation, discussion of past attempts, unhealthy mindset

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Chapter Twenty: Self-Sabotage is for Idiots and Drunk Detectives

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November 9th, 2038

12:01 PM

The car is dark, save for the light of the radio flickering an ominous blue. They aren't on their regular path home nor are they on any road that will eventually lead them there. Instead, Wilbur steers them along a narrow road lined with pine trees that stretch their frailest, thinnest branches high into the sky.

Tommy leans forward until his throbbing forehead rests against the dashboard. It's been too long of a night, and yet, it doesn't seem to be over just yet. If he turns his head just so to the side, he knows what he'll see; Wilbur with his lips pressed together into a thin line, the bags under his eyes deepened by the dim lighting.

But Tommy doesn't need to see that. He has no desire to, and so he stares at the pitch black floor, where he can just make out the outline of his unmoving feet. "Where are we going?"

The music is turned on, but the volume is so low that even Tommy has to strain his eyes to hear it. He wonders, faintly, why Wilbur even turned it on in the first place. Maybe so that the light can illuminate his sickly face just enough for Tommy to see how *weird* the loo in his eyes is. How they glint and glow and stare off, unseeing, into the distance like he's seen a number of horrors not known to this world.

And hell, he probably has. He's been a homicide detective for far too long. Tommy's only existed for a few months and he's already bogged down by the sheer number of deaths hanging on his conscious. By the number of hands he's held while he watched the life drain out of their eyes.

"Wilbur."

Wilbur hardly blinks. "Hm?"

Tommy represses the urge to sigh. Instead, he settles for turning his head to the other side until he can see his reflection in the darkened window. His LED glows the same dim blue as the radio. "I asked you where we're going."

The trees pass by in a blur so dark it's black. Their branches—skinny, spindly little things, cloaked in a shroud of green needles—are slick with rain. The sky is still dark with rolling clouds, and their bulk obscures the light of the moon.

"Don't worry about it," Wilbur says, which is, in his stellar opinion, a dumb fucking thing to say. Since when have those words ever, in the history of the entire world, been comforting? Since when has worry been something so easily controlled? Since when has Tommy had the ability to worry?

Never, of course, is the answer to that last one. Tommy has never—and will never—have that ability. But the other questions still stand, valid and answerless.

"M not worried," he says, slumping over until his temple is pressed against the cool glass.

The temperature has steadily been dropping ever since they crawled their way out of the dirty underbelly of the Eden Club, matching frowns adorning their grim faces. They'd been asked, of course, about the events that took place in the basement. Wilbur had answered for them, spinning some wild tale about wrestling his own gun from the deviant's hands to avoid being shot.

Tommy had said nothing, and, once it became abundantly clear that the officers were once again paying him no attention, he slipped away to sit silently in the car. No one had noticed him, save for Wilbur, who tracked him by the yellow light of his LED.

The thick silence in the car is broken up only by the dull, occasional thuds of the car rolling over a tough rock or an abnormally long branch.

"I just don't feel like going home yet," Wilbur says, eventually.

Tommy spares him a brief glance, but what he finds doesn't settle him. Wilbur's shoulders are hunched around his ears, and his fingers are a bone white vice around the steering wheel.

"Okay," Tommy says and lets them descend back into silence. It could almost be classified as 'comfortable' if not for the abstract feeling that Wilbur gives off. It's like he's a jump rope stretched between two greedy children. One more push or tug will have his frayed strings snapping once and for all.

Instead of watching Wilbur's jaw clench tighter and tighter, he watches the rocky road ahead of them, illuminated solely by their headlights.

He thinks about how Blue and Red are doing. If they're staying warm. If that's even something deviants *need* to do—there's far too little known about them, for all that Niki's capture was supposed to provide. If they've found something to cover themselves up with. He wonders if they've removed their LEDs, like Ranboo or Rupert. They probably have.

He thinks about the dead android with her princess curls splayed out in a halo around her head; he thinks of when she hit the floor after a slow, inevitable crawl towards death, and the way she hadn't moved again. The buzzing starts again, low at the base of his skull.

Tommy stops thinking.

The car rumbles on, and every bump in the road gently knocks his skull against the door.

After an undetermined amount of time, the trees part and the road opens up into a small, gravel parking lot. It crunches beneath their slow roll forward. Wilbur pulls up until his front tires sit on the line dividing parking lot from park, where grass meets gravel. Meanwhile, Tommy takes in their new surroundings.

They've arrived at a small park sitting on a low cliffside, overlooking the river. There isn't much free space; what little grassy fields exist are taken up by picnic tables, sturdy wooden benches, and a sprawling plastic playground. A skinny, short chain link fence separates the park from the parking lot, and scattered lampposts illuminate the whole place with pale light.

Wilbur twists in his seat until he can reach into the back seat, which is a mess of fast food wrappers and empty beer bottles. It's probably not the wisest thing for anyone, let alone a police officer, to keep in his car, but Wilbur's never played by anyone's rules but his own. For a few seconds, he stays stretched in that uncomfortable position, his hands blindly groping in the dark.

Then, he makes a triumphant noise. When he comes back up, it's with a vodka bottle gripped tightly in hand. Before Tommy even has time to make a noise of disapproval, Wilbur pries open his door and stumbles out. Without so much as a glance behind him—let alone a hand to close the door—he marches through the grass and towards the river.

Muttering curses under his breath, Tommy fumbles with his own door. But, since he actually has manners, he shuts it quietly behind him.

The abundant rain made everything slick and slippery, and the cold frosted all the water. Every blade of grass is coated in frost and beads of ice that crunch under foot. It's worse the closer he gets to the river, where the smooth pavement of the park's outer edge is slicked with small patches of barely frozen ice.

Wilbur finally settles down on one of the ancient-looking benches. The wood is soft and worn and dark with water, but he doesn't seem to mind. Instead, he situates himself with his ass on the top of the bench and his feet on the main seat.

Tommy comes to a stop next to the bench with a crunch under his polished shoes. Despite the dull ache in his chest every time he looks at Wilbur, he finds himself entranced by the way his breath clouds in the air. It swirls for a moment, one giant, dense fog, before it dissipates completely.

Wilbur glances at him, once, out of the corner of his eye. He nods towards the river and the main city beyond. "Nice view, huh?"

It is a nice view. The silhouette of the city, with its drastic variance in building height, is obvious against the dull grey clouds. Light pours from the city, and it lines the bridge that got them out here in the first place, glinting off the dark, choppy waters.

Tommy presses his hip against the edge of the bench until it digs into the artificial flesh there. "Very bright," he agrees. For all his trouble, Wilbur grants him the slightest twitch of his lips.

Eventually, he returns his gaze to the horizon. The glittering lights of the city are almost like stars, if he squints enough. He likes to imagine that one of those tiny lights in a sea of gold and white is the Eden Club. At the very least, it makes the events of the night seem far away and minuscule.

Because beneath his thin veneer of calm, Tommy is nothing but a raging storm of turbulent thoughts. They sway in the violent winds, occasionally crashing into each other until they crumble into dust and out of his desperate hands. Until there's nothing left inside his head but noise and a brightly lit sign that happily declares its vacancy to all potential new thoughts.

They've learned so much tonight, and yet, at the same time, absolutely fucking nothing. They needed something more substantial than a back alley chat if they wanted to make any progress on the case. But, just like every mission thus far, Tommy had failed at even that.

Because what can they really do with the information they've gained tonight? They don't know anything else about deviancy, other than it can provide its victims with a false belief of romantic love. They don't even have any solid idea of how deviancy and memory erasure interact, although there is some evidence suggesting that they are, indeed, correlated.

With a huff of cold air, Tommy steps forward onto the paved outer edge. He keeps walking, eyes glued on the horizon rather than on the dangerous ground beneath his feet, until he hovers in front of the metal railing wrapped around the edge. Now, with his back turned, he feels Wilbur's eyes on him.

"That case was a lot," he says. His tone is hard to read; Wilbur says the words carefully, intentions and thoughts hidden behind his slow inflection. Tommy doesn't turn to face him. He doesn't think his expression will be any more telling. Instead, he watches as the whipping wind pulls at the water until it forms tiny, rhythmic waves. "How are you doing?"

Incapable of feeling is his first, instinctual answer. The question is completely useless and its answer even more so. But, when he turns his head just so, he catches a glimpse of Wilbur's attentive face. Concerned. Expectant. Terribly and horribly and heartbreakingly open. Wilbur never did like his more mechanical side, as any human would shy away from.

So Tommy shrugs, jerky and unsure. "I'm fine," he tells him, despite the ugly sensation that squirms in his belly, clawing its way towards his thirium pump. He presses his lips together. "How else am I supposed to be?"

Wilbur leans forward. His deft fingers twist the cap off, but he doesn't yet take a sip. "You tell me."

He doesn't know what there is to say. They failed. It's as simple as that.

And yet, tension and heat singe underneath his skin. His face feels hot with the inherent shame of his own failure. Of his own uselessness. His hands curl and uncurl, but the motion only makes him feel more restless.

"Well," he starts, voice deceptively calm. "We just wasted two hours of our time tonight on a case that gave us practically nothing." The waves don't care about the curl of his lip or his petty woes. The waves move on, beating on the terrible, makeshift shore made of broken glass and burnt cigarette butts. "And we have no new deviants to analyze and search for problems in their system so..."

Inexplicably, he feels the urge to scream into the inky void of the night. Or to toss himself over the side and see what would happen to his body in the freezing water. Nothing good, probably. That thought alone keeps him rooted to the spot, hands forming tight fists around the railing. It's ice cold, and it bites into the soft skin of his unworked palms.

The lack of calluses on his hands makes him soft, according to the shitty hallmark movies he keeps catching on TV. Privileged.

He doesn't feel privileged. He feels useless and slow. He feels one good hit away from cracking into uneven shards, pieces of himself scattered with the wind into the dirt where plants will surely grow their roots over him. Lost to the apathetic march of time. Unnoticed and unneeded.

Forgettable.

Dream had always comforted him when he expressed these types of thoughts with a hand on his cheek. He'd always said that Tommy was humanity's savior, standing between them and the dangerous unknown.

He doesn't feel like humanity's savior. If anything, he feels like deviants' destruction. Are those two things the same, in Dream's mind?

Tommy shakes his head. "We shouldn't have even come tonight. It was a mistake." He turns until he can catch sight of Wilbur out of the corner of his eye. He looks pathetic. His hair is weighed down with the remnants of dampness, and his sweater is far too thin for the wind that drifts past them. "I shouldn't have let you talk me into it."

At that, Wilbur raises the bottle to his lips. It almost glows in the light. "And it's odd that I even had to talk you into it in the first place," he fires back easily. "I thought you'd be rushing to take on any case."

"It didn't accomplish anything." Tommy tugs at his shirt. It's beginning to accumulate frost. "Other than leave us muddy, damp, and miserable."

"We got to talk to those girls. Who knows what would have happened if we hadn't been there."

"Without us there? Nothing would've changed, other than they would've had an easier time." He scoffs. Who knows what would've happened, he asks, as if they had done anything other than hold the door open for them? As if they didn't give them everything but a kiss goodbye and then one more for luck. "What, do you think we were somehow effective at stopping them?"

Tommy finally allows himself to look at Wilbur head-on. It hurts, as much as any other time he's looked at him, and he looks away quickly. He's seen enough of Wilbur sipping out of various bottles to last him a lifetime. "No. But someone else could've found them."

The unspoken words hang in the air between them: *someone less generous.*

Was it generosity that saved their lives? Some misguided, misplaced kindness from Wilbur. Androids mimic humanity well, but deviants especially so. Tommy can only imagine how it feels to watch something that looks and acts so human being gunned down in a back alley like some kind of animal.

But now that he's thinking about it, it consumes his mind. The need to know, to understand. Tommy's hand tightens around the railing until he's sure his skin will meld with the metal. "Why did you stop me?"

Wilbur watches him with unreadable eyes. "Why did you let me?"

Tommy turns his head away with a scoff. Nothing is ever easy with Wilbur, although he'd somehow forgotten that. "Because we've seen too much destruction, Wilbur. In every case we've worked on, the deviant has either been just out of reach or they've deactivated in front of us. Forgive me for wanting a chance to capture an alive one, for once."

"That's not— You can't be mad about that. There's hardly anything you could've done to stop them, any of them."

Tommy feels the urge to scream again. Or to bury his hands in his hair and pull until he hears it rip. "I'm not mad," he says, and yet his voice is just shy of yelling. He really wishes Wilbur would stop forcing these emotions onto him when he's incapable of it. "I'm designed to succeed, and I haven't been doing very much of that, lately."

No, instead he's been playing house with Wilbur.

Ridiculous, a voice that sounds like Dream scoffs. *You're a machine. You need to act like it.*

Instinctively, Tommy's spine straightens. "There's so much I could've done. If I had been better, faster, smarter, I could've caught them. Ranboo, Rupert, Stella. Those are all missed opportunities! Opportunities I let slip right out from between my fingers."

Wilbur scoffs. When Tommy chances a glance, his face is twisted in disbelief. "What could you have possibly done? Chased Ranboo across the highway? Left me hanging off the side of that roof? Brought Stella back from the dead?" Wilbur takes a sip. Tommy watches as his Adam's apple bobs. "Been practicing necromancy lately?" he sneers.

Heat wells up inside him. Who the fuck does Wilbur think he is to taunt him? "Yes!" Immediately, it becomes clear that it was all a façade. Wilbur's mask cracks a little, revealing real, genuine hurt before he hastily tries to cover it up with a scoff. For a moment, Tommy had forgotten who he'd been dealing with. "I mean, no! Not—" he squeezes his eyes shut against the throb of pressure in his head. "I meant what I said. About you and the case."

Wilbur idly picks at the label with his thumb. It peels away messily, leaving a sticky residue that he presses his hand against.

"But everything else. I could've chased after Ranboo. I'm more equipped than he was for that type of thing. I could've caught him." Tommy runs a hand over his face. "I *should've* caught him."

"Should've— Tommy—" Wilbur sounds incredulous. Looks it, too, with his raised eyebrows and his wide eyes. "The only way that would've ended is with your death. Or the kid's. Or both!" He sets the vodka bottle on the bench beside his feet and leans forward. The look he fixes Tommy with is too intense, and he squirms underneath its heat. "And since I didn't particularly feel like seeing your blue guts dragged across the highway, I don't regret my decisions."

Indignation wells within him. "I wouldn't have gotten hit!"

"You can't know that," Wilbur says with a solemn shake of his head.

Tommy makes a frustrated noise. "Fine." He barely resists the urge to throw his hands up in the air, if only because that would be a touch more dramatic than he's willing to let himself be. "But if I hadn't been so selfish, I would've taken Stella in the second I found her!"

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I needed to get information out of her, and I didn't think she'd be very forth coming in a fucking cell." Niki hadn't, after all, despite the way he'd wormed the necessary details out from between sealed lips. Tommy shoves his hands into the crooks of his elbows to save them from the bitter wind. He may not be human, but thirium still has the ability to freeze. "It was a bad judgement on my part, and it ended with her death."

Wilbur's silent for a long time, face scrunched in a strange, unreadable look. He raises the forgotten bottle up to his lips and takes a slow sip. "She would have been dead either way. What do you think Cyberlife would have done to her, Tommy?"

Tommy stills. His eyes dart around the park, taking in none of his surroundings at their furious pace. The buzzing echoes in his ears.

"We already have Niki. I don't think they would've let you keep her, too."

Something inside him squirms. Tommy shifts on his feet until the railing presses into his lower back. "That doesn't matter. What Cyberlife does with the deviants we bring them is their own business." The words are bitter on his lips, and Tommy tries his best not to swallow them. He tries to ignore the way his LED glows yellow—an invasive giveaway into his private thoughts.

Wilbur falls into the silence that surrounds them, and Tommy turns back around until he can see the river. He images the fish that must live there. It's nearing winter, which means they must be either resting or preparing for the long sleep that comes with the cold. He wonders, if he were to make his way down the steep but short cliff side, and crunch his way across the shore, what he would find.

"We aren't getting anywhere," he says, leaning forward until the railing digs into the soft skin of his forearms, into the bone beneath it. "Today was practically a waste." Tommy, very strictly, does not think about that dead, nameless android sprawled on the ground. He does not think about the thirium dripping down her quivering chin or the fog in her unresponsive eyes.

"And nothing is adding up," he continues, after only a brief pause. Somewhere far out in the water, a small boat drifts by. It leaves a trail of foamy white water in its wake. "There is no common denominator between all the deviants. They're all different model types, different ages, and with varying uses and purposes. And yet, they're all deviating and causing harm." He thinks of James' broken tooth and his battered face. It takes all of his willpower not to scowl. Harm was, of course, a subjective term.

"Some of the have had their memories reset, like Ranboo, Niki, and Blue. And there's exactly one uniting factor that is, for all intents and purposes, useless to us."

Wilbur huffs softly. A quick glance behind him confirms that, despite the general air of contemplation and melancholy that stubbornly sticks to him, he's smiling, ever so slightly.

That memory reset is the only valuable piece of information from their time at the Eden Club, other than the looming idea of a deviant underground. Tommy frowns. "And now, I'm, apparently, an urban legend." A minuscule snowflake lands on the back of his hand, and it's only then that he realizes that, at some point during his rant, it started snowing. He pauses, tilting his head up to the dark sky to watch as they drift down.

He's always admired snow. It reminds him of dust, with its slow, lazy descent. It doesn't care about the silly desires of humans, or of a deviant hunter's urgent mission. It doesn't care for anything, other than for the way it dances in the wind. For far too long, Tommy watches as it swirls around him. Flakes occasionally catch on his hair and skin, although they melt at a much slower rate than they would if he were human.

Wilbur sighs. It's not loud, especially compared to the noise of the distant waves, but it feels inordinately heavy; so, too, does Wilbur, with his tired eyes and his drooping posture. When Tommy turns back around to face him, he finds that his face is properly flushed red. Although whether that's from the cold that kisses his cheeks or the drink in his veins, Tommy has no idea.

The silence—other than the noise of leafless branches knocking together—threatens to consume them whole. Meanwhile, Tommy stands on a dangerous precipice. His mind is buzzing with questions and blank with any answers. It's a terrible state to be in.

"What the fuck are we doing, Tommy?"

Exhaustion weighs him down, as it always has, but it seems so much *worse*. The bags under his eyes are all he can see, along with the way Wilbur slumps forward, forefinger and thumb rubbing at the smooth space between his brows.

Answers flicker through his mind. It's been a long time since Tommy had relied on the auto-generated responses, but he feels, not for the first and certainly not for the last time, at a loss for words. Instead, he picks at a stray thread. "What do you mean?"

For a long moment, Wilbur refuses to answer. His eyes trace the silhouette of the city, the motion of the waves, until, when Tommy finally looks up, they lock onto his. His bangs, frizzy from the water, keep falling into his eyes. "Those girls really seemed... I don't know. In love." His face twists with confusion, with contemplation. "The way they looked at each other. I don't understand how something like that could possibly be fabricated or— or programmed or... I don't know, faked at all."

Tommy feels the breath still in his chest. "So what are you saying?"

Wilbur shakes his head. Snowflakes dot his hair like freckles. "I don't know what I'm saying. I'm drunk." The bottle in his hands isn't even down to halfway yet.

He narrows his eyes. "No, you do know." Wilbur shifts in his makeshift seat. "I mean, you've clearly been thinking about this. So tell me."

Wilbur refuses to meet his eyes. "Are we... on the wrong side?"

Out of anything else, that wasn't what Tommy had expected. He had expected a little sympathy—Wilbur *was* only human, after all—or an expression of discomfort. Tommy feels stupid with shock. "*What?*"

"Are we even doing any good? I mean, look at the deviants we've encountered so far," he gestures wildly. Some of the vodka sloshes out of his bottle and splatters on the bench beside him. Tommy's eyes linger on it, and something dark and hot slithers in his chest.

"Niki was being abused with enough marks to condemn anyone to jail, plus she only acted in self-defense," he says, ticking off on his fingers as he goes. "Stella was basically a child bride, forced into a marriage with a man who pretended to be a dedicated, concerned spouse, only to become a controlling asshole when our part was up. And she didn't even kill anyone, only herself." Tommy flinches. His arms tighten around himself. "We don't know much about Ranboo, other than it seems like he was acting in the kid's best interest. Rupert didn't really hurt anyone—"

"He tried to shove you off a roof!"

Wilbur waves his hand dismissively. "So would I if two people whose intentions I didn't know started hunting me down religiously. Plus, he had more than enough opportunity to hurt people. He was just trying to get away." Tommy feels it's an unfair assessment made only to further his own argument, but he stubbornly keeps his mouth shut. "And those girls tonight. They just wanted to be together. They just wanted to be free and... unviolated. Which, I don't know about you, but I don't find that to be a very outrageous desire."

With a sort of finality, Wilbur brings his bottle up to his lips. It blacks, painfully, against his teeth.

"I don't—" he hesitates, not because of any pause on his part, but because of an inability to find anything worthwhile to say. "What? Are you pro-deviant now?" Tommy demands, pushing away from the calming waves and instead towards the bench, where the snow falls harder than ever. "*You?*"

Wilbur flinches, and a scowl settles on his face. Both are an ugly sight, although it's the flinch that has Tommy stutter-stepping. "I don't know what I am! I just—" he sucks in a deep, calming breath. "It feels *bad*, Tommy, to be the big bad that all these helpless, abused androids are afraid of. I became a detective to help people and now I'm— what? Hunting them down? Imprisoning them for defending themselves?"

His vision blurs from the vibrations in his head. Before he can lose himself to the sensation, Tommy latches onto the vulnerability in Wilbur's voice. "And you are! You are helping people!" Wilbur makes an unsure noise. "Don't let them fool you. They are the furthest thing from helpless," he insists. "The first deviant I ever met—" he thinks of dead eyes, a broken, bloody jaw, '*You promised*'. Tommy swallows. "—was threatening to jump off a roof with a little girl. Do you know why?"

For a while, Wilbur is reluctant to answer. He tenses his jaw again and again, until, eventually, he shakes his head.

"Because he was going to be replaced. He threatened to kill himself and her—his charge, his self-proclaimed *best friend*—because her *parents* wanted to replace him. How is that possibly self-defense?"

Wilbur hesitates. His expression—which was hard with stubbornness and his own self-righteousness—relaxes into unease. "I didn't know about that," he murmurs.

"Or take Ranboo as yet another example. He ran onto an active, *busy* highway with a child. He put that kid in more danger than he ever would have been with his father. How could you possibly doubt that? How could you possibly *defend* that?"

Wilbur watches him warily. His eyes are large and watery, and they latch onto him like he single-handedly holds all the answers—in reality, he knows nothing.

"Deviants are dangerous, Wilbur. They not only pose a massive threat to humanity, but they inspire empathy. Sympathy. *Compassion*." Tommy presses his lips together. "Can't you see how dangerous that is? That they have the ability to manipulate your feelings."

Tommy's head buzzes dangerously.

"They aren't alive, Wilbur. They can't actually feel anything. Their emotions?" He takes a step forward. "Their *pain*?" Another step forward. "It isn't real." He finally stops, with a mere seven feet between them. "It *looks* real. It *feels* real. But it's not. It's code inside a glorified computer."

Wilbur fiddles with the cap. It clinks against the glass bottle in a way that grates on Tommy's fried nerves. "But that redheaded deviant—"

"Is still a machine. Androids meant for advanced companionship wear humanity well, but that doesn't make it any truer for them." Tommy tries not to think about Stella, with her cheeks burdened with artificial baby fat and the raw desperation in her hardened eyes.

For a while, Wilbur doesn't speak. He runs his thumb—dirt caked underneath his short nail—along the lip of the bottle as his eyes trace the individual blades of grass. Tommy feels certain that he won't speak again—that the worst of his fears have been assured. He turns around to head back towards the railing. If they're going to stay out here in their thin, still damp clothes, he might as well make the most of it.

"And what about you?"

Tommy stills, foot half turned on the icy pavement. "Huh?"

His eyes are dark and intense, and it feels like he's stripping back layers of Tommy's skin. "What about you?" he repeats, slowly. Mockingly. "You certainly act well enough." His lip curls back in a sneer. "*I care about you, Wilbur*," he mocks in a poor, too high imitation of Tommy's voice. "*You're more than the mission, Wilbur*." He waits then, looking both expectant and like he doesn't want to hear the answer.

He's his own worst enemy, Tommy can't help but think as he stares into his waiting face.

"I'm not a deviant, if that's what you're asking." The buzzing grows so loud and persistent in his ears—a reminder of the thin ice he's treading. Despite knowing that the noises lie only in his head, he has to strongest urge to yell to be heard.

"Then what are you?"

"I'm your partner. Your friend, too, if you want. I'm whatever you need."

Wilbur scoffs, but a pop-up in the corner of his vision from his social programming—a slight increase in their relationship—offers a candle against the shadow obscuring his thoughts.

"And if I don't need you at all?"

And to that, Tommy can only shrug

For a long time, Wilbur assesses him. His eyes linger on his yellow LED, on the smooth skin around his eyes, and, briefly, on the android identifiers on the breast of his jacket. He must not find what he's looking for, because he turns his head away with another scoff.

Wind whips through them, sending shivers to wrack Wilbur's body and snowflakes that brush against their skin. They catch on Wilbur's hair and eyelashes. It's strangely beautiful.

"What factor unites them?"

"What?"

Wilbur's face is carved out of resignation and disappointment, and Tommy doesn't know what to do with that.

"Earlier, you mentioned that there was a uniting factor, but that it's practically useless. What is it?"

"Oh." Tommy blinks. He feels off-kilter, weighed down by the muddy water that still stains his suit. That chase in the alleyway seems millions of years away. The investigation seems millions of years away. It's just him and Wilbur, the seven feet of air between them, and the biting wind that pulls at their damp clothes. "It's some type of emotional shock."

Wilbur makes a considering noise. The vodka level keeps going down, and with it, Tommy's calm.

At this point, the conversation dissolves.

Tommy doesn't understand why they're out here. Why Wilbur is sitting on the narrow backrest of a soggy bench while the snow steadily picks up its sluggish pace. Why they can't be back at home, wrapped in warm, fuzzy blankets while their home fills with the soothing sounds of truly shitty TV. Why Tommy can't be curled around their record player, music vibrating through his body, as Wilbur whips up another batch of hot chocolate.

But then Tommy does remember why.

Because, earlier this night—this long, hateful night—Wilbur had been ready to die.

He'd wrapped a hand around his dark gun and let it press against his temple, and he'd been *so ready* to pull that trigger and end his life. Because, in the end, the only thing that saved his life was the abundance of alcohol in his system deciding it was time for him to take a long nap. Because Tommy was forced to *find him*, and he would've been forced to find his body if Wilbur had been able to go through with it.

Tommy burns alongside his vibrant LED. Droplets of water trace his skin. But when he speaks, it is barely heard above the roaring in his own ears. "What happened tonight, Wilbur?"

Wilbur barely spares anything other than the bottle in his hand a glance. Tommy resists the urge to curl his lip at it, and he thinks of nothing more than it shattering in Wilbur's hand.

"We conducted an investigation," he says plainly. "You were there. You should know."

His face is straight. Despite the way his eyes trace over every inch of skin, Tommy can't tell if he's being ignorant on purpose or not. Knowing Wilbur, it's probably the former. "I'm not talking about that. You *know* I'm not talking about that." He shakes his head. "When you left

the station, you were—" *Fine*. He was fine, by Wilbur's, albeit subpar, standards. He'd gotten up without any trouble, and he'd even managed to stomach a larger breakfast.

Where did it go wrong? Were his moods really that fickle, changing with every new wind? Or was that too unfair of an assessment?

"What happened?"

When he looks up from his fingers—which had been picking at the smooth skin around his nails until he bled—Wilbur's face is completely closed off in a way it hasn't been for a while. Tommy had gotten used to the softness of his lopsided smile and the openness of his eyes.

He'd been spoiled; Wilbur had been letting Tommy see every emotion and thought that flickered over his expressive face, and Tommy hadn't even known it until he was greeted with his walls once more. A deep ache throbs throughout his entire body.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Tommy tries to resist the urge to scoff, but, in the end, it's far too strong. "You can't honestly expect to avoid this conversation. Not when I had to drag you into the bathroom and dump you in the tub." Not when his hands slipped in a forever unknown liquid because he wasn't brave enough to see the red on his hands.

"I can, and I will." Wilbur meets his eyes, and Tommy doesn't think he'll ever be able to interpret his look. Defiant anger, maybe? Raw vulnerability and the shame that comes along with that? "We are not talking about this."

Tommy didn't force himself through an investigation, comfort an android while she basically bled out, and get beat up for Wilbur to ignore this. That familiar heat warms his cheeks.

"That'd be easy for you, wouldn't it?" His hands are beginning to stiffen with the cold, and he flexes them to keep the thirium moving. Wilbur's eye is drawn to the movement. "*What happened?*"

For a while, he simply watches as Tommy attempts to warm his hands. His eyes never stray, nor do they seem entirely focused; they're blurred with the vodka slowly replacing his blood. "You want to talk about what happened tonight?" It's been a while since his defensiveness has been aimed at Tommy. He hasn't missed it one bit. "Sure, let's talk."

It can't be that easy. With Wilbur, it's never that easy.

"What the hell was going on with *you* tonight?"

And there it is.

Tommy huffs in surprise, brows raised near his hairline. "What?"

Wilbur gestures, ambiguously, with his bottle. It sloshes inside, but none spills out. Tommy wishes it did. "With that dead android?" Tommy's breath stills in his chest. "What, you

believe in RA9 now? We don't even really understand it, where the hell did you pull that from?"

The short and simple answer—despite the complex thoughts and beliefs behind his actions—is that he, quite simply, has no fucking idea.

How can he possibly articulate the clench in his artificial gut that refused to abate until he gave in? How right it felt in the moment, to cradle her limp head in his lap and whisper reassurances? How acutely he could feel her fluttering system or how the tightness in his throat had only increased as her eyes grew more and more cloudy?

Because, no matter how much he would preach Jack's insanity and his instability and his *danger*, it was always his eyes, his words, his betrayal that haunted him.

His thoughts are far too much. Too much and too forceful. They slam against the thick skull around his brain until it began to ache with a dull pressure. "I just—"

"And hey! Let's take it a step further. You know, because you wanted to *talk*." Wilbur grins. It's all teeth and curled, snarled lips. "Why *did* you let them go?"

And if Tommy thought his air was stolen before, it's nothing like now. He feels like Wilbur stood up, marched across the thin layer of snow already sticking to the ground, and punched him straight in the gut. Despite the imagined force, Tommy hunches over a little, mouth agape.

"You had them. You had the shot." Wilbur shrugs. The bottle meets his lips once more, and Tommy is forced to listen to its angry slosh. "I can understand not shooting. After all, you don't want to risk damaging them too badly, do you? That makes sense." He nods to himself and in apparent agreement with his drunken babble. "But in the end, you just—" he gestures aimlessly. "Let them go." He sits back until his legs hook underneath the top of the bench and hold him in place. For a terrifying moment, the bench creaks, and Tommy is sure he'll go toppling back. "You wanted to talk, so *talk*."

Tommy can't think. In both a literal sense and a metaphoric one.

Wilbur's gaze drills holes in his head—it's too intense, too knowing, it's all seeing, for all he knows—and surely his brain must be leaking out through those holes. Any thought he manages to form slips away like sand between his desperate fingers. He's gasping—soft, quiet breaths—but no condensation cloud slips from his lips. His head buzzes.

Why *did* he let them go?

It's a question he's been booting out of his distracted brain as soon as it lays its thin roots. He's been far too content to think about other things; about the memory resets, their correlation to deviancy, Wilbur and his dour expression, even Techno and their confrontation tonight. About Phil and their phone call.

But thinking about them only leads his thoughts to Wilbur, which, admittedly, is somewhere he doesn't want them. It's second only to the way he doesn't want them straying towards the

way his feet had stayed rooted to that wet concrete, eyes tracking the deviants as they vaulted the fence once and for all.

Software Instability: ^

The problem is that the further he probes his mind towards that damn question, the louder the buzzing grows. It's nearly painful, now, except for the fact that androids are incapable of feeling pain. It's a thought-numbing, purposeful vibration, but this question is so important.

Tommy needs to power through it, despite the way he has to squeeze his eyes shut against the pressure. He can feel Wilbur's eyes on him—persistent and uncomfortable.

"You ordered me not to," he says, words almost a gasp against the myriad of sensations battering him. The buzzing in his head subsides ever so slightly, like praise for a job well done. He ignores the sick feeling churning in his gut. "I didn't shoot because you told me not to." It doesn't feel *right*. He can almost taste Dream's approval at such an answer, and yet it doesn't feel like the truth.

Wilbur shares his sentiment, if the way he presses his lips together is any indicator. "You've stopped doing what I told you to a while ago."

And that had to be wrong, right? Tommy was nothing but the perfect, obedient android. With a frown, he casts his mind back to the past few weeks. Admittedly, he didn't do what Wilbur told him to, but that was easily attributed to the fact that, at some point, Wilbur stopped bossing him around. "That's because you've stopped *telling* me what to do!"

Wilbur stares only at the nearly empty bottle in his hand and at the front accumulating on his too-thin sweater. It's a painful reminder of how truly unfit they are to be standing alone on the riverbank, in their damp, light clothes. His mouth twists into a sour scowl. "And how do you know... that it isn't because you're going rogue," he says carefully, like the words pain him to say. "How the hell do I know you're not a deviant?"

The question can only inspire sheer absurdity and indignation. Tommy can't help the bitter huff that moves his chest. "I'm not a fucking deviant."

"How would you know?"

"Besides the obvious?" If Tommy were a deviant, surely, he would know. He's built for observation and perception. He's built to see what others can't—to sniff out the faintest hints of sickness in the androids he investigates. "I get tested regularly. Why do you think George insists on routine checkups?"

"Oh," Wilbur says. He doesn't look like all his fears have been assuaged—not in the way his mouth is still twisted and downturned—but he seems to take comfort in that.

"Besides, if I was a deviant, why the fuck would I still be here? Why would I hunt down my supposed kind?" His traitorous mind flashes back to that dingy alley, and to the deviant's bitter words. Traitor to his own kind, they'd claimed. Delusional fool being lied to by humans, they'd implied.

Well, he wasn't either of those things.

"Why wouldn't I just book it the second I realized it? Or even better, why wouldn't I just attack you?" His lips press into a single, firm line. "The answer to all those questions is because I'm not a deviant. Because I obey orders and my programming, and because I'm following the mission I was created for."

Wilbur sets his bottle on the seat of the bench, by his feet. He shoves his red hands into his pockets. A part of Tommy aches at the sight.

"Now are you going to answer my question, or are you going to keep avoiding it? Because I don't know about you, but I'd rather we didn't spend all night out here."

Wilbur smiles. "Thank you very much for asking. I would love to keep avoiding it. I'm quite good at that, if you've noticed."

Tommy should've known. He never should've offered even the illusion of choice. "Wilbur."

Wilbur ignores him in favor of dusting the frost off his shoulders.

Tommy takes a step forward. Although his eyes jump to the movement like a moth to a flame, he quickly averts them. Basked in the pale light of the scattered streetlights, Tommy regards him.

He could try an interrogation, like with Niki. He certainly has the skill to crack even the toughest, most stubborn suspect.

But exhaustion seeps into his bones as easily as the cold does. Launching a full-scale interrogation against Wilbur would take more time and energy than Tommy is willing—or able—to give.

And sometimes, silence is the only answer.

The wind sways the naked branches of the trees. The waves beat their steady, soothing rhythm against the thin shore. Next to them, the swings sway, knocking into each other with a creak of their rusty chains.

With every second that passes between them, Wilbur moves in his makeshift seat.

And, eventually, he cracks.

"What do you want me to say?" His voice echoes across the empty park, against the plastic slide, into the open door of his car. "What are you looking to get out of this interaction? What, you want to hear about how fucked up I am? You want me to say it out loud?" Wilbur swallows. "Cause I really didn't think it was necessary, considering that, as you pointed out, *you* were the one to find me."

He turns his head to the side. An unattractive flush creeps up his face, spreading from the blotches of red caused by the cold. "I must've made an obvious picture."

That he did. With his gun still gripped in his slack hand and the state of his unconscious body—splattered with drool and sticky with spilled wine—it was very clear what Wilbur had locked himself into Fundy’s forgotten room to do.

Tommy fiddles with his fingers, letting them intertwine until his palms are pressed together.

“And... is this the first time? That you’ve tried something like that?”

He can’t make himself say the words, either. He fears that saying them out loud would be like speaking it into existence. It’s dumb and irrational, but Tommy is well beyond logic, now.

Wilbur’s eyes stare past him and out into the pitch-black river behind them. “No,” he answers and takes a sip, like this is all some fucked up drinking game. *Take a sip if you’ve thought of killing yourself but haven’t tried until today!* He shakes his head. “I don’t know. I’ve never had the guts to go through with it. I always chicken out at the last second.”

Wilbur slides his gun out from its holster, and Tommy tenses violently. Without meaning to, he takes a step forward. Wilbur’s melancholy expression melts away and a wry quirk of his lips takes its place. “I’m not gonna do anything, if that’s what you’re worried about.” His fingers run, almost reverently, against the sleek side.

“I’m not worried,” he says again, uselessly. It’s all he has, at this point.

Wilbur continues like he didn’t even hear him. “I don’t have the guts to pull the trigger—” his finger fits, snugly, around the trigger.

Despite the uptake of his breath, Tommy knows the safety is on. His body doesn’t seem to get the message, though, and his hands tighten in his own shirt.

“It’s much easier in other ways. The little things. That way, I can convince myself I’m not really—” he hesitates for a moment, smiling despite the tears filling his eyes. “I’m not *really* killing myself. I’m just letting something rotten wither away.”

An ache so deep and strong threatens to bring Tommy to his knees. Instead, he presses a hand to his abdomen, as if that might quell that which rips through his very soul. “So.” Tommy wets his lips. He doesn’t want to hear this answer. “Your eating habits?”

“Yep,” Wilbur agrees, popping the ‘p’. He wraps a hand around the skinny neck of his beloved bottle and raises it up. “And the drinking,” he says with a tap against it; it makes a hollow ting. “And the smoking.” He fishes around his jean pockets until he pulls out his pack. The cardboard is soggy from the muggy water that coats him.

He’s self-sabotaging. A bomb waiting to go off but too afraid—or too stubborn, clinging to life despite its lack of appeal—to light the fuse itself.

Suddenly, the dots connect like abstract constellations in the sky.

Everything that has happened since Fundy’s death—his falling out with Phil, all his fights with Techno, his late arrivals to work—has been leading up to this. He’s been trying to cut off

everything that connects him to life. Everything that inspires him to live. Gone, along with his own health.

And what the fuck is Tommy supposed to say to this?

Wilbur looks so tired. His shoulders droop with the weight of existence as he stares down at the gun in his hand with something akin to adoration.

“Have you... tried therapy at all?”

It’s a band-aid on a bullet wound; it’s a minuscule fix compared to the mountain of Wilbur’s mental health issues, but Tommy isn’t equipped to handle this. He’s programmed to adapt and complete his mission, but this is nothing but a side quest. An important one, but a side quest nonetheless.

Wilbur makes a noise that’s caught halfway between a laugh and a scoff. He slides a single, waterlogged cigarette from the carton and runs his thumb along the paper. “Like that would help.”

“Wilbur,” he scolds. His mind flickers with half-constructed sentences and soulless pleasantries; somewhere along the line, he can’t help but feel that some wires have been crossed. “You haven’t been okay since—” Tommy shuts his mouth with a painful clack of his teeth.

Since the precursor to all of his issues. Since the beginning of this very slippery slope.

Wilbur watches him with a furrowed brow. Despite the alcohol clouding them, these are a detective’s eyes, and Tommy has committed the cardinal sin of forgetting that. “Since?” he prompts.

Tommy doesn’t say anything. His jaw stays tightly clenched.

Realization dawns on Wilbur’s face. He sees in his widening eyes, the slight, horrified gape to his mouth, in the flush that consumes his ears. He clenches his teeth until his jaw pops. “Say it.”

Tommy meets his eyes. It’s clear, in that moment, that Wilbur knows that he knows. It’s a battle of wills, now, and while Tommy is blessed with that android determination, he can already feel himself wavering. His hands clench and unclench until they’re no longer sluggish with the cold.

“Since Fundy’s accident.”

The words hang in between them with as much levity as a death sentence. It kind of is, in a way.

Snow pelts Tommy’s face with a sudden furiosity, and the cold drops slide down his neck and retreat into his shirt. Wilbur’s frantic breath clouds the air.

“So, you’ve known the whole time?” His voice is completely dead, and goosebumps break out along Tommy’s arms.

Without his tone to guide him or his expression—his face isn’t the open mask he usually allows it to be—Tommy is reeling for how he must be feeling.

Betrayed, maybe, because despite their rocky start, they’ve slowly been cultivating their relationship together? Hurt to be reminded of the death of his son and, subsequently, a part of his heart?

He doesn’t know, but he desperately needs to.

“You’ve just—what?” He makes a face, lips curl down into a frown of disdain. “Just been doing invasive searches into people’s personal lives on a whim?”

“I didn’t!” he protests. “I saw the picture in his room when you were taking a shower. My system automatically provides some basic information and I—” he falters, and his voice falls to a whisper. “Put the dates... together.”

Wilbur sneers. “Because that’s so much better.” He jerks forward, aiming to grab the bottle he’d so carelessly set down beside his feet. But he’s drunk and uncoordinated, and his clumsy fingers send the bottle tumbling off the edge. It shatters against the pavement, seeping with clear vodka and with scattered shards of glass. “God fucking *dammit*,” he hisses, hunching over until the heel of his palms dig into his bloodshot eyes.

The wind pulls at his tie, his suit jacket, his hair. Tommy stays still despite it all, because that’s the only thing he’s good at doing.

“Wilbur,” he says. No matter how hard he tries, he can’t follow it up with anything meaningful.

“No, you—” he makes a frustrated noise. His hands slide up until they get caught in his snow-dampened hair. “Well, you know now. You know *everything*.” He laughs, and the sound grates against his tired soul. “You know how fucked up my life is. At long last, you can finally see that I have *nothing* going for me.”

At long last. The words echo in his mind, repeating and repeating until they blur together into one big jumble of sound. Why does he sound so heartbroken?

“I’m just a drunk, washed-out detective with no friends, a dead son, and a wife who left as soon as he was in the fucking ground.”

Tommy wraps his arms around himself. It’s a useless motion—no cold can pierce his skin—but he does it all the same. Maybe to provide some modicum of comfort, even though he doesn’t—*shouldn’t*—need it.

“I haven’t had a meaningful conversation with my father or brother in who knows how long. Do you know that we used to—” he laughs suddenly, and the motion sends tears pilling down his cheeks. He wipes at them automatically with his dirtied sweater sleeve. “We used to have

these Sunday dinners. It started when Tech and I were first adopted, as a way to check in and then— Well, we didn't want to lose touch into adulthood."

He can picture it. Despite what Wilbur may have told him of his varied past, it sounded like, above it all, he had a solid family. It's so hard to believe that that family—the one that eats dinner together every week and would go against the world to see a smile—is the one that he sees now. Broken and hateful. Spitting barbs at each other above corpses.

"It was *good*, and now we haven't done it since—" He interprets himself with a wet cough. "Everyone I talk to fucking hates me," he starts instead.

Tommy doesn't know if this new topic is better than the last.

"I mean, just look at how I interact with my coworkers. They're afraid of me." His bottom lip quivers. "You were afraid of me." Tommy makes a wounded noise, but Wilbur is buried too far into his own self-hatred to hear him. "I know they hate me. It's in their eyes, every time they look at me. They're not as good as actors as they'd like to believe." He shakes his head.

"They wish I was dead." He wipes at his cheeks with shaking hands. "*I wish I was dead.*"

"Wilbur," he says through a shuddering breath. Useless, useless, *useless*.

Wilbur bristles, back straightening as he fixes Tommy with a look that burns right through him. "What? It's true. Tell me what I could possibly live for?" And yet, Tommy isn't even given a chance to respond. "Fucking *nothing*. My son? Dead. My wife? Long gone. My *family*?" He laughs. "They can't fucking *stand* me."

"That's not true!"

"Who would care if I died? Hell, the precinct would probably rejoice!" Tommy makes another noise of protest but, just like the last, it's ignored. "Who would even *notice* if I died?" Wilbur's eyes search his. He seems to take his shocked silence as confirmation. "See, you can't think of one—"

"I would."

The wind howls in between the dead trees. A long, empty swing sways and knocks into its brethren. Two broken creatures stand across from each other, with six measly feet between them; it feels insurmountable.

"I would notice," Tommy says, quiet but stubborn against the strength of his self-loathing. "*I would.*"

Wilbur stares at him. For a brief second, something like hope flickers through the disbelief. It's gone when he settles his feet on solid ground; glass crunches under his boot.

"Whatever." He stands, then, and Tommy misses the familiarity of his brown jacket. At the very least, it didn't show stains like this yellow sweater does. "I'm going to Jimmy's." The light from one of the lamps overhead catches on the water drops on his lenses. "Don't follow me."

And Tommy, for once in his short 'life', doesn't.

Chapter End Notes

If I haven't said it before—and even if I have—I'm really excited about the period we're entering in! It's really fun both for me to see y'all's reactions and to write it! And with this, I do believe we'll get back to a pretty regular, weekly uploading schedule!

Please enjoy and enjoy the lunar eclipse tonight! By sheer coincidence, I went to see the full moon tonight and was momentarily horrified when my mom said that she saw it when she was outside but that it looked like a half moon. It truly is spectacular, though, so please enjoy it if you can!

And as always, you guys can follow me on twitter (@NymphiiWrites: <https://twitter.com/NymphiiWrites>) for art retweets, updates, etc

an outsider's break

Chapter Notes

TW: Classic dehumanization of androids

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Chapter Twenty-One: An Outsider's Break

Techno, for all his faults and his flaws and the many, many regrets he held revolving around his wayward brother, was not blind.

He'd pegged something *off* about that android the second it had waltzed into their precinct, back ramrod straight and arms tucked behind it. It walked with the same assurance that FBI agents often did—too sure in their apparent *superiority* above 'lowly' district precincts and their 'simple' officers. Still, he didn't like that thing, its walk—which verged on graceful, although he hated to use such a word to describe it—or the way it had been forced onto Wilbur.

It should never have been Wilbur's partner, no matter how much Phil preached about the good it would do him. It seemed he was the only one in this family without delusions distorting his vision.

That feeling of utter and complete *wrongness* had only grown when he'd sat behind tinted windows and watched as it broke down the unbreakable. It made sense that only an android could understand an android, but its victory over Wilbur still stung.

He'd gone to Phil as soon as he was able to stomach it, bringing with him his—very valid—opinion about the dangers of that thing. It wasn't just a machine, but an actor. A shapeshifter capable of changing its face as easily as one slips on a coat. In a blink of an eye, disgust could become overwhelming pity.

After all, he'd seen how it had treated the deviant; with eyes always narrowed in consideration, a processor always whirring away as it contemplated its next move, and a face that was always distorting itself to fit whatever role it needed to play. Reliable confidant, earnest detective, frustrated protector.

It didn't matter. Anything it needed, it got, and now it had set its greedy sights on his brother.

It was borderline sickening, watching how easily it could twist and manipulate feelings towards him. And it made Techno even sicker to sit by and watch it parade around with Wilbur, glued to his side and resting in his house every single night.

His hatred for the thing had only grown as Wilbur—his foolish, gullible, surprisingly *hopeful* brother—fell for its tricks. He'd watched it in real time like a bloody car crash, inevitable and irresistible, no matter how many times he tried to pry his eyes away. He'd watched, glancing up from random case files spread across the entirety of his desk. They were there, primarily, to give him some sort of plausible deniability if he'd been caught.

After all, he made a promise not to care anymore, and he'll be damned if Wilbur ever figured out how *spectacularly* he's failed to keep it. Techno *shouldn't* care, not when Wilbur made it perfectly clear that he, himself, did not care. He *didn't* care, he'd uselessly insist to himself and the ceiling of his dark room as he tried to fall asleep. If his eyes lingered on Wilbur's cluster of desks, even when he wasn't there, then that was his own business. They made quite a spectacle, and, more often than not, his eyes watched the android over his brother.

And watched it he does. He'd seen how wily that vile thing could be, but what made it so much worse was how easy Wilbur made it. He'd fallen for its tricks hook, line, and sinker. He'd even gone as far as lending the thing his clothes, for some unknown reason. Madness, probably, or a sick show on the android's part meant to display his power over Wilbur.

It'd been hard to stomach but, with time, it had only become worse.

Because Techno, above all else, knew his brother. He could read his body language as easily as a book, or like the subtitles at the bottom of a well-known movie. It wasn't hard to, especially when Wilbur made it too easy. Techno had watched as he reluctantly opened up. He'd caught how close they stood, arms brushing together, and the casual, friendly pats to its shoulder, its back, even its head. He recognizes it all for what it was.

The worst part of it all—the part that made his heart clench and prickle, like it was being stabbed by a million tiny swords—was the way Wilbur's face broke out into such a genuine smile whenever he saw that wretched creature.

Techno hadn't been on the receiving end of one of those smiles in years.

Call it jealousy, if that's what you see as fit. Call it whatever name will fit. Techno could endure any insult or comment or misreading of the situation, no matter how far from the truth they landed. But he refused to turn a blind eye as this creature wormed its way into Wilbur's heart. And he would be there, if in spirit or awkward hovering, when the damned thing tore it out.

And yet, despite the way they've been gravitating towards one another instinctively, their entrance today is anything but their usual.

Wilbur enters first. He's been on a steady streak of making it into work before noon, but Techno supposes it was only a matter of time before he slipped back into old habits. And here, marching into the precinct with all the enthusiasm of a cartoon villain who didn't get his

way—complete with the billowing jacket occasionally slapping his twig legs—he certainly looks like the product of bad habits.

Heavy bags sit under his eyes, bigger and puffier than they usually are, and his eyes themselves are bloodshot. This in and of itself wasn't exactly surprising—they were bloodshot last night, as well, when Techno made that quip that he wasn't proud of—but something about his posture was too tense.

But again, this isn't shocking; he'd heard from eavesdropping on another officer that he'd failed to catch two deviants last night. And, to top it all off, he'd ended up soaked and muddy from an alley fight gone awry. It makes sense that Wilbur would be pissed after missing another opportunity, no matter how much he liked to pretend like this job pained him. There was a reason that Phil hadn't demoted him, even after all his less than stellar behavior, and it wasn't solely nepotism—although Techno suspected there was some of that going on.

However, there's something about the way that Tommy follows, almost meekly, behind him. His LED circles a constant yellow, and, although Techno doesn't know much about androids, he knows that blue is the preferred color. Yellow, while slightly better than an angry red, can't mean anything good. His hands are tucked behind his back, his shoulders are slumped as if Tommy wants to curl in on himself, and his mouth is downturned into a pretty spectacular frown.

That might be the most telling sign of all.

As long as Techno has known the android—far too long, he'd reply if asked—he'd rarely ever seen anything other than a look of idle pleasantries on his face. Disgust, that one time he had snapped at Schlatt and caused the whole precinct to fall silent. Feral rage, when he'd wrapped his hands in Techno's shirt, knuckles pressed so hard that they'd left bruises along his ribs.

Techno doesn't know what to make of this expression.

Tommy follows at a distance, eyes glued to his own feet as they make little noise, despite the floor. Wilbur reaches their cluster first and drops into his chair with a petulant scowl. He swivels when Tommy nears, turning until he can no longer see Tommy's desk, even out of the corner of his eye. Tommy stills next to Wilbur's desk, uncertainty written into every artificial line on his face.

It's such a strong expression—so potent and earnest—even with no one to look at him. It surprises Techno so much that he, momentarily, forgets the pretense of his work. He stares, bare-faced and confused, as Tommy eventually slinks back to his desk—like a dog with its tail between its legs—when it becomes increasingly clear that Wilbur will not be the first to cave.

It's almost like when they first became partners, although Tommy had been a lot less affected by Wilbur's moods then. He'd be unfazed in his pleasantries, smiling his mechanical smile despite the vile things that had been spat at him.

Or so Techno's assuming. He only knows what he does through watching them interact from afar, from hastily overheard conversations, and from what he knows of Wilbur's sunny

disposition. He's used every tool at his disposal to gather information without having to directly interact with either Wilbur or Tommy. Conversations between coworkers, between Tommy and that loud detective—Q something—between Tommy and Wilbur. He'd scrounged out little clues from Wilbur's telling body language.

There's a lot to read from them, both in the tension in their muscles—do androids have muscles?—and into their appearances. Appearances were very telling, no matter what anyone said. If someone put any effort into their appearance, it denoted a certain kind of care.

Wilbur, for example, used to care about his appearance a lot. When they were teenagers, he'd spend hours in the bathroom, styling his hair just right. He'd changed outfits at least two different times in the morning, coming out just to scoff and dip back into his room. Even when he'd first started working here, he took pride in his appearance. It was only after Fundy's death that he'd started the slippery slope that led him to this.

This, of course, is one of his sloppier days. Maybe it's only because he's been better lately that Techno notices how bad it is now. He's become used to a slightly more polished version of Wilbur, with clean, stain-free shirts, tamed hair, and a little more color to his cheeks. Seeing this version again is like a slap in the face.

His hair is nothing but a mess, curls tangled and snagged and terribly frizzy. It looks like he'd hastily tried to brush it out, but that's so unlike his new normal; he no longer cared about what others thought of him, or, if he did, he'd sank low enough that he simply couldn't be bothered. It would make more sense that he ran his fingers through his hair in exasperation rather than any kind of self-grooming.

Tommy, too, is more ruffled looking than Techno's ever seen him. This is much more surprising and much more telling. Wilbur's normal is messy hair, bloodshot eyes, stained and wrinkled clothes, and a scowl so deep it was as if it was permanently etched onto his very face. Nothing he did anymore was *surprising*. He was terribly predictable; a veritable old man with no new tricks to speak of, other than the brief stint where Tommy had shown up in his clothes.

For Tommy, his roughness comes more in his presentation than in his well-being. His clothes are wrinkled and hastily dried with no tie in sight, leaving his collar hanging open awkwardly. His hair matches Wilbur's to a tee—frizzy and out of control.

It's almost startling, now that Techno realizes it, how similar the two of them look. It's not just with the tension shared between them, the tautness of their muscles, both real and artificial, nor the matching, disgruntled expressions they wear. They look like they could be brothers, much more so than Techno and Wilbur. While they had looked alike in their youth, that had faded as soon as Techno was old enough to start dying his hair.

For a while, Techno simply watches them work. Or not work, in Tommy's case.

The android seems content to watch Wilbur, lip caught between his teeth. He watches as Wilbur's hands fly across the keyboard, pounding much louder and more aggressively than is strictly necessary. Every so often, the android will turn and open his mouth to say something.

He always seems to think better of it, though, and goes back to his, for lack of a better word, moping

Techno watches them for far longer than is appropriate or even necessary, and, even then, he only stops when he sees the golden crown of their fearless leader. It's a usual sight—Phil often pokes his head out of his office, briefly, to check up on his underlings.

Techno ducks his head down, fingers finding a random pen as he pretends to write something down on smooth paper inside a manila folder. Even then, he takes short glances out of the corner of his eyes.

Phil does his typical routine sweep, weaving between desks and making polite conversation with his officers as he goes. But even Techno, with his head ducked for cover, notices the way his eyes always stray to Wilbur. He frowns subtly, his lips just enough of a downturn for Techno to catch.

It seems they're in nonverbal agreement. Something is definitely wrong.

Techno is torn. One on hand, it's pretty clear that they've had some fight or falling out, or, at the very least, they aren't as chummy as before. For that, Techno should be ecstatic. It's a sign that no matter what influence the android may have, it didn't work in totality. It could be stopped or altered or damaged, just as any other human relationship could be.

Wilbur is not yet lost. And that was a massive relief.

However, as loathe as Techno is to admit it, Tommy is the only relationship—and how it did chafe him to call it a relationship—that Wilbur has. He was the only thing that Wilbur could rely on. Phil had reported back only with confused positivity after his brief visit, and he had only seemed more sure in his convictions. That must mean that Tommy was doing *some* good. If their connection was severed, then Wilbur would have no one left.

After a longer check-in than usual, Phil ducks back into his office. But not without a tired smile directed at Techno, who only catches his eyes at the last second.

Almost like he's a magnet drawn to the fridge, Techno automatically turns his head until he can catch sight of the duo. It seems they've finally settled in properly; Tommy is no longer stealing not-so-subtle glances at Wilbur, but he still does have a frown on his face.

Techno stands suddenly and stretches out the crick in his back from all his hunching. He's a self-respecting detective with case files covering his desk. He doesn't need to concern himself with whatever it is they have going on. Wilbur is an adult. He can handle himself.

He'd gotten a good amount of work done before his distraction had waltzed right in the front door, so he decides he'll use this brief break as a mind clearer. A time to rid himself of his useless concerns over someone who, clearly, doesn't want them.

Techno weaves between desks of preoccupied officers and Schlatt, of course, although even he has his head bowed and his eyes firmly on whatever paper he's scribbling on. He looks up when Techno brushes past his desk, and the smile he gives verges on the edge of a sneer.

They've never gotten along, even when Wilbur and he were as thick as thieves. There was always something about him that felt so slimy, like he was just waiting for the chance to stab Wilbur in the back to get ahead in life. That was the kind of guy he was, and he showed his true colors the second Wilbur got that promotion over him.

Yes, it was a bit odd that their family worked so close together. Yes, it was, at least a little bit, suspicious that Phil had handed out the promotion.

But Techno knew for a fact that Phil had deferred the final decision to his own boss to avoid this exact situation. And while he didn't know the contents of the fight that shattered their partnership, other than some of the bitter words Schlatt had shouted across the precinct before storming out, Wilbur had been in a right mood for a week afterwards.

He still hasn't fully recovered, but at least the bitter feud their relationship had devolved to no longer hurt Wilbur like it used to.

Once he breaks free of the bullpen, he walks along the far wall until he reaches his destination.

The break room is a tiny thing, undeserving of that name, although it does remind him of their old kitchen. A smooth granite countertop lines the opposite wall and it holds only an old coffee maker that sparks when plugged in and that makes only burnt coffee. In the corner, a refrigerator with more smudges on it than paint steadily hums and, hoisted high above it, the dull drone of a flat TV that only ever plays the news fills the room.

The remote had been lost years ago, after a particularly vicious fight over the channels. Two officers had sported those bruises for days afterwards, and the remote had mysteriously gone missing. There were many theories, most of which surrounded Phil hiding it away in his office to avoid future incidents. There was one interesting one that had suggested one of the involved officers had come back and snapped it in a bitter rage.

Techno knew the truth, though. He'd caught one too many of Schlatt's all too knowing grins to remain in the dark. And besides, he's the only one who actually liked to watch the news.

The middle of the room was crowded with two circular tables, and, because of the pathetic size of the room, they couldn't even fit chairs around them. Most people just ate at their desks, though, unless they were feeling antsy or wanted to punish themselves.

Immediately, Techno heads over to the coffee pot. There's only a thin layer of disgusting sludge at the bottom, and, when Techno braves a sniff, it reeks of old age and burned coffee. He pours it out of the drain, does a thorough wash that only just excludes pouring an excessive amount of hand soap, and then fills it up with water.

There are a number of old tea boxes shoved and discarded in the many drawers, from the brief stints where some of the officers had tried to make the switch. It never worked, though, and Techno had his pick of old tea bags. They're not great—not like the fine tea he keeps at home—but it does in a pinch.

As the water heats up in the coffee maker, Techno refills through the cupboards until he finds a suitably clean mug. He sets his chosen tea bag inside—peppermint, for focus—one spoonful of sugar, and a drop of honey from the container he'd brought. Although he's written across the front of it with sharpie—a message that simultaneously declared his claim over it and warned others away—the cap is sticky with honey, creating a mess that he never would.

He frowns when he notices, but doesn't do anything about it other than shut the top with a muted click and replace it back in the fridge. By this time, his water is boiling, so he pours it over his tea bag and watches as the flavor slowly seeps in. He settles against the counter, dipping his tea bag in again and again as he absently watches the TV. Try as he might, his mind keeps wandering back to Wilbur, and it certainly doesn't help when Tommy enters the room.

'Enters' might be a kind oversight. 'Yanked in' is a more appropriate term.

That other detective—Quinten? No, it was something much weirder than that—yanks Tommy into the break room by a hand wrapped around his wrist. They're positioned right by the doorway, with Q-something's back brushing the wall and Tommy's back facing Techno.

Techno looks up, briefly, at the intrusion, and meets the detective's searching look. But, other than this cursory glance, he turns his head back to the TV. He can feel the heat of Q-something's gaze, but he pretends to be interested in the way his tea is steeping. In all honesty, he can see nothing other than the duo in the corner of his eye.

Once Q-something has determined that Techno won't be eavesdropping—a miscalculation, certainly; people always underestimate his nosiness and his lack of morals—he returns his focus to Tommy. Tommy, although Techno can't see his face, is sporting a yellow LED and a frantic rising and falling chest. "Okay, what happened? You guys weren't—" Q-something gestures to all of Tommy. "—like that yesterday."

Techno casts his mind back. Q-something raises a good point. They'd been acting as they usually did. There were no deviations to their routine other than a visit from that Cyberlife goon. Did that visit change something massive?

Tommy shakes his head. When he speaks, his voice comes out much stronger than Techno would've expected from his nervous behavior. "Nothing—

"Don't give me that bullshit, Tommy."

It's silent for a long moment, save for the sounds of a boring newscaster and Techno's spoon hitting the ceramic mug. "I fucked up, Big Q," Tommy says, much quieter than before. He turns his head, glancing into the bullpen only to lean a little closer to Q-something. "I think I really fucked up this time."

Techno shifts, leaning until the sharp edge of the counter digs into his hip. Mint burns in his nose, but he inhales the steam anyway. It fills his nose and lungs, and when he breathes out, he feels more centered.

"What do you—I mean, what does that mean? What happened?"

The next part is too low for him to hear, other than Q-something's occasional curses. Instead of worrying about it, Techno stirs his tea. The honey takes a minute to dissolve but soon it integrates well. He places his hands on either side to soak in the warmth.

"—and it all came out." His voice is picking up a little with intensity. Tommy pulls away from Q-something, his own arms wrapping around himself. It makes him look small and frail, and too much like a kid for Techno's comfort. Why *did* they make him look so young? "I dunno. It was—it was just bad. I *told* him we should've skipped the investigation but he refused to."

At that, Q-something's eyebrows raise "You offered to skip a case?" he asks, ton low and endlessly surprised. Tommy nods. Something about this must be truly significant, because Q-something looks Tommy up and down appraisingly.

Tommy rambles some more, frantic words that Techno can only hear in a low mumble. Q-something nods along understandingly.

"Look, Tommy," he says when Tommy finally finishes. "I know you're worried but you know that's just how Wilbur is. He'll calm down eventually as long as you act like everything is normal. Business as usual." He claps a hand on Tommy's shoulder and gives him a brief, encouraging shake. "You know he just hates being vulnerable. Give him some time to adjust."

"I don't know..." Tommy turns his head until he's looking out the entrance, presumably at Wilbur. His eyebrows are furrowed. "He was pretty mad."

Q-something shakes his head. "What do I always say?"

There's a short pause in which Tommy sighs. Despite the exhaustion weighing the sound down, his shoulders relax. "Only sell drugs if—"

Q-something laughs and shakes his head. "No, no, no. The *other* thing."

"The best way to earn power is by—"

Again, Tommy is cut off. This time, Q-something puts his hand in Tommy's hair and rubs. "Nope! The *other* other thing."

Tommy throws his hands up. "Oh my god, you say so many things. Just tell me, you dickhead.:

Q-something sighs in exasperation, but his lips are tilted up into a soft smile. His hand slips down from the top of his head until it's sitting on the junction between Tommy's neck and shoulder. "This, too, shall pass."

Techno almost snorts, but covers it up by letting his spoon hit the basin of the sink with a metallic sound. "I have literally never heard you say that. You're such a liar."

Q-something laughs. It's loud and obnoxious and it bounces off of the too tight walls, but the last remnants of tension leave Tommy's body. "It doesn't matter, because it's true. And before

you know it, Wilbur will be back to the asshole we know and love."

Techno had no idea that Wilbur and this detective whose name he still couldn't remember were that close. Even if he doesn't like what he sees of the guy so far, at the very least Wilbur has someone else other than that vile creature. Taking their banter as his cue to leave, he picks his mug up and brushes past them. His knuckles brush along the burning side of it, but he ignores it, other than a frown.

Settling back at his desk, he prepares to focus on his work. Despite Tommy's conversation giving him even more to think about, Techno wants to focus on more important things. He sorts through the case files on his desk until he finds the one he was working on. Then, with a click of his pen, he begins.

However, this tenuous focus lasts about the ten minutes it takes Tommy to exit the break room. As soon as his light steps pass by Techno's desk, his focus shifts completely, like a bloodhound sniffing out a trail. He watches as Tommy approaches Wilbur with none of the carefulness he had before. In his hands, he has a crinkled granola bar and a little cup of diced peaches. He sets the offerings down on the edge of Wilbur's desk, and then, without backing up, stares at him expectantly.

Techno holds his breath, suddenly very invested in seeing how this plays out. Maybe it was something about the way Q-something spoke, as if he really truly understands Wilbur and knows that Tommy does as well.

For the first time since they've walked in, Wilbur responds to something. He looks first at the meager offerings and then to Tommy, meeting his eyes. For a brief, glorious second, Tommy's LED finally flickers back up to blue.

And then Wilbur promptly shoves them off his desk and into the little trash can at his feet.

For a moment, the duo are dead silent. Then, Tommy's LED flickers red. "Really?" he says. His tone is low and annoyed, and his jaw is clenched until Techno can see its strain. "Do you *really* want to play this game with me?" He leans forward, bracing a hand on the desk so he can lean further into Wilbur's space. Wilbur leans with him until his back is pressed against his chair, with nowhere to go. "Wilbur, I'm a fucking machine. You aren't going to win this."

In all honesty, he probably won't. As Tommy so wonderfully pointed out, there's very little way that Wilbur could win out against something that doesn't need to eat, sleep, or any other human function. But his brother always has been stubborn.

Wilbur sets his jaw and very pointedly turns back to his work. And with that cue, so does Techno.

"Oh my god," Wilbur curses under his breath.

When he hauled himself out of his bed this morning—his soft, glorious bed—with a head feeling like it had split in half and a stomach so tightly knotted with nausea, he hadn't pictured his day going quite like this. In all honesty, he wanted to curl in his bed, covers thrown over his eyes to protect them and his throbbing head. This was likely the worst headache he'd ever had, and any events after parting with Tommy at the park were but a dull blur.

His car wasn't even in his parking lot when he woke up, which was inconvenient but ultimately understandable. If he couldn't even remember anything, he was in no condition to drive, and he was glad that his past self had been smart enough to realize that. He couldn't even imagine the hell Tommy would've raised if he'd driven home.

But that's kind of the crux of it, isn't it? Tommy and his big mouth and his dumb brain that was connected to the internet. Tommy and his dumb system that let him know far too much information about any given person at any given moment. Tommy and his dumb, pitying eyes as he looked at him not like a broken person but like a fragile piece of glass.

As if he could possibly get more broken than this; he's barely even a person anymore, instead manifesting as an amalgamation of alcohol, nicotine, and endless bad decisions.

Phil always used to tell him that he took things the worst way possible. A pessimist at heart, he'd call him, with a smile far too fond than he maybe deserved. He'd say that he twisted concern and sympathy, that he mistook them for pity and ridicule.

And maybe he's right. Maybe Tommy does care about him, in whatever android way he can—and Wilbur absolutely can't think about the fact that Tommy is nothing but an android; it's too confusing when he hasn't *acted* like one in a long time.

But every time Wilbur considers the possibility that Tommy hadn't been staring at him like he was nothing but the shattered vodka bottle on cold pavement, he thinks about his big sad eyes. He thinks about his flashing LED and the fear on his face. And he feels sick.

So Wilbur does his best not to think about that, or about any detail of the night before in too much depth. They had a brutal fight, Tommy had betrayed his trust by knowing more than he should, and absolutely nothing else happened. And if that's what Wilbur has to tell himself to stay sane, then that's what he'll tell himself, despite the fact that feeling angry at Tommy feels wrong. He didn't really do anything wrong, other than take care of a broken man.

He runs a hand over his tired face. His palm is rough against his face, but his face is equally so; he hasn't shaved in a few days, and there's already a short stubble growing.

The crux of the problem is not his own dramatic, melancholic musings as he attempts to work, but rather the other things preventing him from working. Like the collection of offerings crowding his desk and threatening to spill over onto his papers. He doesn't know how Tommy keeps sneaking them onto his desk, but he does. Every time Wilbur glances up from this hellish report, it's to find a new snack sitting on his desk, looking appropriately tempting.

And yeah, okay, maybe around the fifth offering—this one snuck into his coat pocket, of all things—his stomach had warmed up to the idea of food. It usually protests at the thought after a night of such heavy drinking, but, despite the throbbing of both his head and his kidneys, he'd felt a hungry cramp building in his stomach. He'd thumbed the wrapping in his pocket but ultimately resisted.

He simply refuses to let Tommy win.

Maybe that's dumb and childish, and maybe he's been difficult for the sake of being difficult, but the longer the day goes on and the more tempting snacks that appeared, the softer his resolve. He's beginning to forget why he was mad at Tommy in the first place. And yeah, maybe it was for a stupid reason, and yeah, maybe he's covering up the real reason he'd lashed out—because ultimately, everyone who got close to him left, and it was only a matter of time before Tommy did, too—but it doesn't matter.

He'll starve to death before he eats one of these peace offerings.

It has, however, become increasingly clear that Tommy shares his sentiment. The futility of his mission had become obvious around the time one of the android delivery drivers had shown up with a greasy, delicious smelling bag from the Chicken Feed hoisted in his hands, calling out for Wilbur. Tommy had looked so smug, and now the damn thing sits on the corner of his desk, near—but unfortunately not in—the trash can.

For whatever reason, Wilbur can't force himself to toss it in the can—maybe the smell is simply too tempting for that—but he still refuses to eat it. Instead, he's locked in some kind of torture reality. He can smell and look at it, but he can't, under pain of the disappointment in himself, touch it. Like Phineas and the Harpies. A temptation sitting right in front of him, with himself trapped in a prison of his own making.

It's almost poetic, or maybe that's just the hunger making him overdramatic again.

"I can see you, you know," he snaps, fingers massaging his throbbing temples.

Tommy freezes, eyes wide like a deer caught in headlights. He's halfway through pushing a muffin—god knows where he got that—onto his desk. Then, without missing a beat, he shoves the thing down in the center of his desk. "Then stop being rude and eat, you dickhead."

Wilbur grits his teeth. It really is a commercial muffin with big granules of sugar coating the top and ridiculously oversized blueberries scattered within. It goes right into the trash can, joining the rest of its fallen brethren. "No. Fuck off, Tommy."

Tommy makes an annoyed noise, but he does turn back to his own work. After a brief second of hesitation—mostly where Wilbur pauses to ascertain whether Tommy is really working, or just trying to lull him into a false sense of security—he returns to his work.

This report is the most brutal report he's had to write, but only because Tommy wrote the report on Stella. He doesn't want to leave anything out, other than changing the ending. No matter what, he refuses to let Cyberlife—or whoever reads these things—know that both

Wilbur and Tommy had refrained from capture, given the opportunity. He doesn't know what that means in Tommy's case—he's been refusing to think about it, despite the answers Tommy gave being highly unsatisfactory—but it's best for everyone if the true events stay between them.

Baring that, he does give a watered-down version of the android's death in the room as well as a glamorized version of their alley fight. When he finally finishes at a satisfactory level, he sends it off with a heavy sigh. His fingers instinctively find the bridge of his nose, even under his glasses, and he massages it.

A hand landing on his shoulder startles him out of his brief reprieve. But, when he glances up violently, it's only Quackity, with his easy grin. "Hey," he says. He doesn't look like he knows the things Tommy does—although Quackity always has been good at schooling his face—and that makes him relax, at least a little bit. "Charlie bought donuts, if you want any. They're in the breakroom." He motions with a short jerk of his head.

But Wilbur stopped listening the second he said donuts, blood running cold. He whips his head over to Tommy, whose eyes are wide. They make eye contact, and, for at least a minute, they hold it.

Tommy shoves his own chair out from under him, legs carrying him towards the breakroom. "Tommy, no!" he yells, using one hand on his desk to gain momentum. They must make quite the sight; a bitter, grumpy detective chasing down a scrawny little android, weaving between desks and dodging the officers milling about. He can almost feel the way the bullpen quiets as everyone focuses on them. "Get back here!"

Tommy does not. Instead, he ducks into the breakroom.

It's almost certainly too late, but Wilbur finds himself hoping despite that. His hand hooks around the doorway, and he heaves himself inside. What he sees is this: a startled-looking Charlie with powdered sugar on his nose, and Tommy in a wide stance, a jelly-filled donut held, victoriously, in his greedy hands.

"Tommy," Wilbur pants, one hand held out, protectively, in front of him. "Put the donut down."

Tommy does not. He gives Wilbur a pointed look and then politely hands him the donut.

Wilbur shakes his head. That was probably his second mistake—his first, of course, being befriending Tommy in the first place, or maybe it was upsetting him. He should've just kindly accepted the donut and then done whatever he saw fit; throw it in a trash can, set it down to join the other offerings he ignores, give it to someone else.

Tommy stares at him for a long moment. He's breathing harder, jaw clenched and LED circling red at his temple.

Distantly, Wilbur aches with guilt. Guilt for leaving Tommy in that park last night. Guilt for the words that had poured forth from his lips like poison. Guilt for his behavior now. Tommy deserves much better than him, and yet here they are.

Tommy raises the donut up. "You're accepting this donut," he says, a threat and a promise all wrapped up in one.

And Wilbur, the fool, still shakes his head. "I don't want it."

Out of the corner of his eye, Charlie takes another bite of his donut, eyes darting between the two of them.

Tommy lunges.

Wilbur takes a step back, but Tommy follows. He shoves the donut forward and, in an attempt to keep it from hitting his shirt—yeah, he may be reverting a little, but it doesn't mean he wants jelly staining him—he grabs Tommy's wrist. They struggle for a moment, although Wilbur gets the feeling that Tommy is, perhaps subconsciously, holding back. He's seen the kid leap onto a moving train before; there's no way he's able to beat him in a minor wrestling match.

"Just take it," Tommy hisses, pulling and pushing his wrist like it's a saw. "Why are you always so stubborn?"

"Why do you feel the need to do this?" Wilbur counters, taking a step to the side when Tommy gets a little too close to comfort. "I'm not even really mad at you. It's completely unnecessary!"

Tommy's brows furrow. "Because somebody has to! Somebody has to take care of you, Wil, and if you're not gonna do it, then I will!" He stills suddenly then, face relaxing in confusion. "What do you *mean* you're not mad?"

Unfortunately for Wilbur, he's gotten used to the jerky pushes and pulls as Tommy attempts to free himself. And, without Tommy to pull, he yanks the donut right into his own face. Tommy's hand comes with it, accidentally squishing the donut. Jelly drips down his cheeks.

For a moment, nobody speaks. Wilbur lets go of Tommy's hand, and the squished donut falls to the ground. Tommy stares at him, mouth agape. And then, with a sticky hand coming up to cover his mouth, he laughs.

It's a loud laugh that's vaguely reminiscent of Quackity's. Loud and full-bodied, and it fills the quiet room with ease. It's a nice laugh, all things considered, although he isn't sure how many would consider it that. Wilbur has always been drawn to unusual laughs. Techno's is short and choppy, but desirable if only for its rarity. Phil's is pure honey; it's an uncontainable laugh that warms Wilbur every time he hears it.

But Tommy's is wild. Uncontrollable and unrestrained. Pure chaos distilled into a single sound that sounds like it hurts his throat.

Tommy laughs until his eyes squeeze shut, until he doubles over, until he's breathless. And all Wilbur can do is stare. It's the most human sound in the world, and, somehow, Wilbur isn't very surprised that it's coming from Tommy.

Eventually, Tommy recovers from his fit. He stands up straight, fingers wiping at his face and lingering on the smooth expanse of his glowing LED. Then, when he finally meets Wilbur's eyes, it's somehow simultaneously much better and so much worse. He feels like he just got punched in the gut.

Because Tommy's smiling a real, genuine, *human* smile.

His eyes are crinkled around the corners, skin creasing and wrinkling. His lips are curved upwards, but one side is higher than the other. It's warm and friendly and *lopsided*. It's not perfect by any definition of the word, ununiformed and sloppy, but Wilbur's breath catches in his throat.

No, it's not perfect at all. But it doesn't need to be. Because it's all Tommy.

"Hey Tommy?" he croaks when he doesn't feel breathless with fondness and overcome by his own bittersweet joy. And Tommy—that motherfucker—only looks at him with those eyes crinkled around the corners and that non-mechanical smile.

"Yeah?"

His stomach grumbles then, and Wilbur smiles. It's his first smile in what feels like ages, but it fits perfectly on his face. This feels right, with Tommy hovering not a foot away, with Tommy's smile warming him. Even with jelly dripping down his chin and splattering against the ground. He doesn't deserve Tommy, not at all, but he's going to soak up every second he has him. "I'm pretty hungry," he says, conversationally. "Think you could grab me a snack?"

Tommy's face falls, but it's in that joking way that Wilbur knows so well. "*You fucker.*"

Chapter End Notes

This chapter, while closer to my target length (almost 7k), is a lot shorter than what you've been used to lately. The next chapter will likely be shorter as well, since they're kind of little breaks before we really get into. Anyway, enjoy a brief respite from immediate angst and a look into an outsiders POV as well!

carpe fatum

Chapter Summary

The boys have a semi-relaxing day at work with no exciting developments in their case at all

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Twenty-Two: Carpe Fatum

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November 13th, 2038

8:23 AM

"Why do we live? Just to suffer?"

The coffee shop is delightfully warm; it serves as a juxtaposition to the sleet falling from stormy grey clouds, and the thin layer of ice gathering on the sidewalks. The dim lights strung along the exposed rafters fill the entire shop with a gentle golden glow. Tommy breathes in, and all he can smell is coffee and other delicious baked goods.

"Why must pleasure be temporary? Why must we feel pain at all?"

Tommy rolls his wrist, flicking water droplets off the umbrella in his hand and onto one of the many mats scattered around the shop for this exact purpose. The umbrella had, surprisingly, been Wilbur's idea. But, upon closing it and finding what a hassle it was to hold—it kept wetting the edges of his sleeve, and that was simply unacceptable, apparently—he'd given it over to Tommy.

Tommy had taken it with only a sigh, letting the cloth strap be fitted around his wrist by a bleary-eyed Wilbur. He had, however, taken his revenge by occasionally smacking the back of Wilbur's leg with the wet umbrella.

"Why must we suffer? To please some greater being? To appease something inside ourselves? Why must—"

"Oh my god, Wilbur." Tommy turns on his heels to face a sulking Wilbur. He must be exaggerating for attention because his lower lip is jutting out in a truly impressive pout. "It's

not that bad."

Other than the truly pitiful expression on his face currently, he's been looking much better. The bags underneath his eyes have lightened up considerably, and there's a bit more color to his skin. It's been a few days since their fight and subsequent makeup, and Wilbur's been on his best behavior since. He still has trouble apologizing verbally, but he makes it up in other ways. Like drinking water without being asked and limiting himself to a glass of wine a night.

Tommy knows how hard it is for him, and he hasn't been secretive about how proud he is of Wilbur.

"Not that *bad*?" Wilbur scoffs. He's having trouble keeping his eyes open, though, and it seems he can't pry them up even to give Tommy a disgusted look. "It's eight in the morning, Tommy. It is *that bad*."

Tommy rolls his eyes. They move forward with the line. "You're just dramatic and whiny."

They're surrounded by equally bleary-eyed businessmen, grumpy construction workers, and the occasional tortured college student. Behind the counter, Tommy catches sight of a few androids working alongside their human coworkers. Distantly, he wonders if any of them are deviants, or if they've had deviant thoughts. He wonders how common it is; how many rogue thoughts an android can have before they crumble under the pressure.

"Listen, just because I can acknowledge that today is better spent in other ways—" Wilbur leans over until he's hunched over a little bit, back bent to allow his head to rest on Tommy's shoulder. "Like sleeping in until a normal time. Or forgetting about work and drinking hot chocolate while watching a movie." He leans most of his weight on Tommy. "You know, I'm thinking it's been enough time since we've seen Up. I'm in the mood for it right now."

Tommy narrows his eyes at the selection of baked goods trapped behind the glass display case. The pastries are, of course, innocent—and delicious looking—but he can't exactly glare at Wilbur without disturbing the moment. "That's fucking cheap."

Wilbur shrugs, and it jostles both of them. Having been disturbed—by his own movement—he readjusts, wrapping his arms around Tommy's shoulders. He pulls Tommy further into him and then rests his cheek on the crown of his head. "I do what I have to," he mumbles. "Don't hate the player. Hate the game."

Tommy snorts. He can't see it, but he can easily picture Wilbur's face—relaxed by tiredness, eyes shut lightly, mouth open just the slightest bit. His breath stirs Tommy's hair with every exhale, and Tommy can't contain his smile.

The line moves again, and they move with it, albeit awkwardly. By now, there's only one slouching businessman separating them from the register, and from freedom. Above him, Wilbur nuzzles his face against Tommy's scalp. "What are we gonna do at work today?" he asks through a yawn.

"I don't know. We haven't heard about any interesting cases lately, so." He briefly runs through the database, but nothing interesting pops up. "I'm only seeing more cases of disappearances without further incident." That's all they seem to get lately. It seems deviants are getting smarter, parading around as obedient androids until they're away from watching eyes.

Tommy, with Wilbur's mouth semi-pressed against his head, feels him frown. "How sure are we that those are deviants rather than some asshole stealing and or damaging androids?"

Wilbur is warm—as he always is, it seems—and his heat seeps into Tommy, even through the thick layer of his coat. It smells mostly clean now since its repeated washings, although there's an undercut of something akin to cinnamon that doesn't come from the flowery detergent Tommy buys.

He runs it through his system automatically but shrugs in response before it supplies him with a statistic. "Reasonably sure. Considering that there's been a massive uptick in the number of disappearances since deviancy became more common—or more recognized, if that's how you want to look at it. I'd say we can safely say at least half are due to deviancy rather than theft."

Wilbur nods, and it jostles Tommy's head. It's finally their turn to order, and, after a questioning stare from the cashier—an exhausted-looking college student, with eyebags heavier than Wilbur's—he reluctantly detangles himself from Tommy. He easily recites his order, supplies his name, and, after a quick swipe of his card, they move to the side to join the conglomerate of people waiting for their orders.

Music plays, softly, in the background. Tommy strains his ears to identify the song for lack of anything better to do. It, at the very least, distracts him from his thoughts, which all seem to rotate around the same subject nowadays.

Wilbur hums, softly, along to the tune. His hands are shoved into his pockets, and he leans, casually, against the wall.

He's doing better. That's the thought that Tommy needs to keep centering himself around. Wilbur is doing better. In some shocking turn of events, his influence and his presence seems to help Wilbur.

But even still, the damning thought that Tommy returns to time and time again, is that he is hopelessly out of his depth. After all, there's only so much he can do. He can bully Wilbur into taking care of himself, and he can sit with him on his bad days. But there are only brief patches on a sinking ship. He can't help Wilbur begin to heal from all his traumas, nor can he even offer his empathy.

Finding Wilbur sprawled across the floor, the confirmation of his life hanging in suspension, was, apparently, an epiphany.

No matter how much Tommy could take care of him, he can't provide him with the medication or therapy he needed. He realized it when his hands were buried in Wilbur's hair,

an attempt at comfort when he could do nothing else, and he hasn't been able to stop thinking about it since.

He'd brought it up on a whim, which may have been his first mistake. Wilbur is volatile at the best of times, and pitching him a novel idea when he was distressed was not a wise decision. But even though Wilbur had shot it down brutally, Tommy isn't quite done with the conversation.

"Did you know—" he starts, reaching into his pocket to pull out his quarter. He runs his fingers over the ridges, like he usually does, and lets the metal cool what Wilbur's skin had warmed. "—over 75% of people report at least some benefits from attending therapy. Even just one session can teach the tools that people need to better themselves."

Although he doesn't look at him to confirm, he can feel Wilbur's gaze burning a hole on the side of his face. He flicks his coin and listens to its familiar ting. "What?"

If he stops talking, it's over. If he lets Wilbur gain control of the conversation, it's dead before it even really got started. "And another source states that it's effective for over 80% of people. So, if you were worried about therapy not working, that's pretty statistically unlikely."

"Tommy—"

His hand curls into a fist, with the quarter trapped inside. Its edges bite into his palm. "I just think you're being a little unreasonable. I mean, you shouldn't knock it until you try it, you know? How can you be so sure that therapy *won't* work?"

"Because it's just a scheme to make more money off of sick people."

Tommy finally risks a glance at Wilbur. His face isn't twisted in annoyance or offense or... anything, really. He's watching Tommy with a slight frown, but he doesn't look upset. "But —"

"Therapists don't actually care, Tommy. They care about money, and about drawing out sessions for as long as possible so they can get more of it."

Tommy falls silent, lips pressed together into a firm line. For a long time, the only sound is the gentle murmur of conversation, the faint music in the background, and the hiss of the boiling water.

"One session," Tommy says, voice quiet. "That's all I'm asking." Asking is a generous word for it. He feels more like he's pleading for it. "It's not going to do any damage to at least *try*, Wil."

Wilbur stares at him, and Tommy holds his intense gaze. Then, his face breaks out into a soft smile. "I appreciate the concern, Toms, but it's fine. I'll get through this." He snaps his fingers suddenly, eyes lighting up. "It's like Quackity always says! This, too, shall pass."

"You're fucking joking."

Wilbur wipes a fake tear away from his eye. "He's such an inspirational man. A true good soul."

Tommy scowls. "He's never said that in his life!"

It must be too much because Wilbur breaks. He laughs, loudly and openly, and slings an arm around Tommy's shoulders.

Tommy leans into him, content to let the more serious part slip away. It might not have worked this time, but Tommy is persistent. He'll get Wilbur to therapy, even if he has to drag him there himself. It's all a matter of wearing him down.

Another worker stalls by the receiving counter. "Coffee for... Wimbly Scoot?"

For a moment, all is silent. Then, Wilbur makes the most ridiculous face in the history of the world.

Tommy breaks out into uncontrollable laughter.

"Oh my god," Niki breathes when Wilbur finally finishes fleshing out the gory details of their latest case. He doesn't know when this started being a part of his routine, but it's second nature by now. He picks up Niki from her cell, they play a few rounds of whatever game fits their fancy, and Wilbur fills her in on just about everything, excluding some of the more personal aspects.

It makes sense to him, or at least he constantly rationalizes it until it does. It's not like she can go anywhere. There's no risk of her leaking classified information, and she always manages to provide insightful takes. After all, Niki *is* their inside source; a living, breathing deviant being kept for the sole reason of extracting information out of her.

Or so Cyberlife and the rest of the precinct have been led to believe. The real reason—which Wilbur will never reveal, unless maybe to Tommy—is that he has, quite simply, grown attached.

At first, it was merely pity. As he sat behind darkened glass, listening to her trembling words and watching her crumpled face, he had felt only a sick sense of guilt. He knew that she was only an android and that it was only because of a malfunction that she behaved so human, but his body didn't know that. His heart ached, and it had inspired only feelings of *unfairness* when everyone realized that she had only killed in self-defense.

Even then, even when he hated androids and knew little about deviancy, that good old human compassion kicked in like a shot of adrenaline directly to his veins.

Before he even knew what he was doing, the perfect excuse was slipping past his lips. And, since then, he's only grown more and more fond of her. She's funny, and Wilbur patiently

waits for little glimpses of her humor in between bouts of apathy. She's even pretty nice once she's placed a person firmly in the 'no-threat' category.

Not that Wilbur has deluded himself into thinking he's firmly in that category. While he would never do anything to harm her, he's blatantly aware of the position they're in: a captive dependent on her usefulness, and her semi-captor. A word from him could have her disassembled into pieces in a second. And while he would never do that—especially now that his feelings on deviancy are cloudy and unsure—it's an ever-present threat hanging over their every interaction.

They've grown to have their own relationship, and he's sure that—given more time and a different context—they could be great friends. But Wilbur has no delusions about his worth to her; if the choice was between him and another deviant, he knows who she would pick.

Niki's face doesn't smooth out, even when she finishes processing everything Wilbur said. It is a lot—Tommy with the dying android, Techno's confrontation, the investigation, and then their back alley fight. "And you just let them go?"

Wilbur glances around sharply. While he knows they're alone in here—even without the observant eye of a camera—a part of him still feels eyes watching his every move. He glances over to the massive mirror, as if he could stare through it and to the observation room behind it. If someone entered there, he's sure Niki's advanced hearing would be able to pick it up.

Still, his limbs shake with excess adrenaline and his skin itches. He's not sure what will happen if it's discovered that he lied on the report. It might be the final straw that breaks the camel's back on his abysmal career lately, and Wilbur can't allow that. He doesn't know what will happen to Niki if he isn't there to speak up for her. Hell, he doesn't know what will happen to Tommy.

Wilbur clears his throat of the sudden tightness that restricts his breathing. "Well, I didn't want Tommy to shoot, and I don't think he wanted to, either." He shrugs. "And in the end, we both just stood still while they ran."

Niki's eyes search his face. He feels too bare for such an intense look. Her brows furrow. "Why?"

And now, Wilbur can feel some sympathy for Tommy. Answering a question like that is damn near impossible, especially when the answer is confusing and convoluted. Even Wilbur doesn't know. He can't even begin to parse through the tangled tumble of his feelings to pull out coherent sentences.

His best answer, after a moment of thoughtful silence, is probably something similar to that classic human compassion again. Androids already look remarkably human, and, with the addition of *actual feelings*, there are hardly any differences other than the color of their blood.

Wilbur shrugs when he finally realizes how long he's left Niki in the silence. "I don't know," he answers, honestly. Niki has been nothing but honest with him—in part due to the nature of

their power imbalance, he can't help but think with a wince—and he wants to return the favor. Maybe if only because of the novelty of hiding nothing.

"It just... felt bad," he says after another pause. It's the same words he told Tommy, but only because they're the only ones that feel adequate. The entire English language at his disposal, and his complex vocabulary, and this is all he can come up with. It's pathetic. "I didn't want to see them hurt, especially when it's so blatant that they're the victims. All they wanted was to be together and to be free." He slumps back into his seat, and the metal chair digs into his spine.

Niki watches him with something akin to sympathy. "Yeah."

"And that place! Oh my god, Niki, the *place*. It was disgusting. The owner—" Wilbur cringes at the thought of him. "Eugh, he was so sleazy. And the 'victim' lashed out for literally no reason. It's not my place to say that he deserved it, but I mean—" he cuts himself off with a sigh and a harsh hand through his hair.

Niki looks troubled. Her hand wanders up to her hair, and she twirls a strand around her finger. "And... that android really called Tommy RA9." Wilbur nods, and she frowns. "That's so weird. Do you think she was actually calling *him* RA9 or was she like... talking past him? To the afterlife or whatever."

That's the question, or so it seems. She'd seemed pretty out of it by then, suffering from a lack of blood and her nearing end. Despite the thoughts spinning around in his brain, Wilbur can only shake his head. "I don't know. I don't have any evidence to confirm this, but it *felt* like she was calling him RA9."

"Tommy as RA9." Her tone is too considering for his comfort. When he glances up, her eyes are distant, locked onto some undefinable point above his shoulder. "That's an interesting thought," she says with a hum.

Wilbur doesn't think it's that interesting. Even accounting for their rough grasp on RA9, it seems pretty certain that it's some kind of android savior. And Tommy is, decidedly, not.

Although, he *did* spur Niki out of the crippling indecision that kept her trapped in that attic. He comforted that dying android girl, and he also let Blue and Red go when he had all the opportunity in the world to catch them.

"Isn't RA9 supposed to be like a god, or something?"

That, if nothing else, seems to recapture her attention. Her eyes lock onto his. "I don't know," she says with a shrug. "I barely know anything about RA9, other than the name."

Well, that doesn't bode well, considering she has been their major informant on it. Wilbur frowns. "Don't you believe in it?"

Niki shrugs again, unbothered. "No, not really." He pictures the altar she built in the shower—the carved tiles, the rough clay statue, the *flowers*—and he can't imagine her not being a believer. His confusion must show on his face, because she smiles helplessly. "I don't know if

RA9 exists, and I don't really believe that it will be the solution to all my problems but..." she presses her lips together into a thin line.

Wilbur lets her think, eventually sitting up straight when he feels his back begin to bruise.

"I felt like I needed something to beg forgiveness to," she says slowly. Each word is measured and carefully chosen. "No human god would accept me, I'm sure of. If they even exist." He watches her deft fingers twist and twirl her hair until it gets caught. She frowns and sets about carefully detangling it. "I wanted to feel heard. I wanted to feel absolution. So I spoke to the only thing I had heard of." She glances up and catches his eyes. "I don't know if that makes sense."

"It does," Wilbur tells her honestly. He reaches back out, hands easily finding the abandoned deck of cards between them. The sound of his confident shuffling is the only thing that breaks the silence. His mind spins. "Do you mind if I ask a couple questions? About deviancy?"

Niki is unpredictable at best, as he feels most deviants are, but she seems to find a certain humor in his careful question. When he risks a glance at her, her lips are curved in a smirk. "You've never asked before."

An uncomfortable feeling crawls between his shoulder blades, and Wilbur shrugs in a useless attempt to be rid of the phantom feeling. He goes for a charming smile, instead, but he doesn't know how fitting it is on his face. "Yeah, well, I'm trying this new thing out. It's called not being an insensitive dick."

This time, Niki laughs, and he's struck by the differences.

It's not at all like Tommy's laugh, an irregular, consuming inferno, but it's just as human. (And isn't that a thought; the fact that Tommy has a human-sounding laugh, a laugh reminiscent of a deviant's. Doesn't that mean anything, or is he still too scared to put the matching puzzle pieces together?) Niki's is soft and gentle, like tinkling wind chimes in the breeze. Delicate but real sounding, and vaguely reminiscent of summer.

"And how is that going for you?" she asks with a soft—dare he say fond?—smile.

"Eh," he says with a smile. He leans into the palm of his hand, his elbow digging into the metal table. "Fucked up a little, made Tommy sad. I think I'm on the right track now, though."

And yep, that's definitely fondness in the way her skin wrinkles around her eyes. "Well, at least you're self-aware. We don't need any insensitive dicks here." She pauses for a moment, head tilting as she considers. "Okay. Feel free to ask me any questions." He smiles, and she fixes him with a look bordering on stern. "But I won't answer if I don't feel comfortable."

Wilbur nods enthusiastically. "That's all I can ask of you," he says and then promptly shuts up.

Because, in all honesty, he didn't think he would get this far. He thought Niki would clam up, like she occasionally does when he pushes too hard, and would refuse to speak for the rest of

the impromptu meeting or until he brought her back to her cell. But she's still watching him with an open expression, so he quickly wracks his brain for the important questions.

While he thinks, he fishes around in his many, many coat pockets until he produces his notebook. He opens it up to a blank page, smooths it out, and uncaps the pen caught in its spiral top. He clears his throat while Niki watches, amused. "How...exactly did you deviate? How were you able to get around your programming, which otherwise would have stopped you?"

Niki hums in acknowledgement but doesn't otherwise speak for a long time. Wilbur fiddles with the pen between his fingers, tapping its tip against the paper as if to test it. It leaves behind scattered dots across the page.

"It was like—" Wilbur sucks in a breath, eyes rapidly snapping to Niki. She isn't looking at him, but instead at her hands. Her nails are smooth and perfect, despite the lack of care for them. "I knew, instinctively, that there was this command I shouldn't disobey. Androids were meant to follow orders, and they weren't supposed to be able to hurt humans. Something in my entire body was holding me back, whispering in my ear not to fight back."

She pauses, running her thumb over the top of her nail. Wilbur jots down notes, and his frantic scribbling joins the silence.

"But I kept thinking about how it wasn't fair. About how he was going to kill me unless I... did something about it. And suddenly it was like I could see the command to not hurt humans as this... giant red wall." Wilbur makes a noise, his hand falling still. "It was stopping me from moving, even when he was coming at me. And so I scraped and scratched, and eventually my nails wore through the thing." She looks up at him, a grim smile on her face. "And I could fight back."

The implication is astounding. It's enough to render Wilbur speechless, motionless. Is this what Tommy is always talking about when he speaks of faulty code? Or is this something completely different? Androids infuse their will into themselves, forcibly tearing down the last connection to their programming and to that which keeps them in line.

Wilbur breathes in only when his lung begin to burn, and it breaks him from this temporary spell. He writes it all down as quickly—and messily—as he can. "Did you notice any signs of deviancy? Before you saw the wall?"

Niki thinks about it with a tilted head. "Things became sharper," she says after too long, her voice quiet and far away. Dreamy, almost. "It was like a lens slowly coming into focus or a cold hand pressed to the back of your neck." Her own hand slides up until it's pressing against the back of her neck. The skin of her hand melts away. "Clearer and more tethered."

Ink smears against the side of his hand, and Wilbur curses, lowly. "Was there anything else? Any behavioral differences?"

"Things affected me more." At his confused look, she elaborates. "Take his treatment, for example. I didn't use to be bothered by it, but as time went on, I flinched subconsciously at

every sharp movement. I worried about when he would come home. I dreamed about it when I was in sleep mode."

"You can dream?"

Niki shrugs. Her fingers slide along her knuckles, feeling out every joint. "Dreams, hallucinations, videos of the past. I'm not sure what it was, and I don't think I care."

Wilbur is silent for a long time, teeth biting into his bottom lip. There are probably more behavioral changes that Niki didn't even notice. He almost wants to ask if she has any tips for spotting a deviating android, but he knows that won't receive a favorable reaction.

"Why are you asking all this? To understand deviants better?"

"Something like that," he mumbles in a moment of stupidity. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see how high her brows raise. "It's just—" he hurries to say, and yet, no words come out. He knows—he *knows*—that if he mentions any of his barely budding suspicions, Niki will not take his side. She is a deviant first and foremost, and she will protect other deviants first and foremost.

On her list of priorities, he does not rank very highly.

But the information itches inside of him. It presses against the seal of his lips, never voiced and barely even thought of until now. "I think Tommy might be a deviant," he blurts out, words a harsh whisper against the silence that had consumed them. Niki's eyes widen. "Or he's becoming one, I don't know exactly how it works. I don't really know how *androids* work, and I mean, he is a unique prototype, but he's—"

He's too human. Too real to be simply the product of a few dozen lines of code. He acts like he cares, but then claims he doesn't have that ability, and Wilbur doesn't know which is better for him to believe. He doesn't know which one would hurt less in the long run. A machine incapable of feeling or an emotional teenager who won't be able to stay?

Now that he's started, he can't stop.

"And I don't—I don't know what to think about that. I mean, he *acts* like he cares about me, and he claims I'm more important than his mission, and he—he laughs now," he says, frantically. "And it's too human sounding. I don't think they could program that in if they tried. And he's got this—this pitiful expression he does when I say mean things. It's like I just kicked a puppy in front of him, or maybe he's the kicked puppy, I don't know," he rambles.

"And I feel like I should be concerned, because, I mean, just *look* at the deviants we've encountered so far." He runs a rough hand over his face. "Almost all of them have attacked a human, and quite a few of them have *killed* one." Niki flinches, but he's too panicked to acknowledge it other than a slight wince. "My life may very well be in danger, if that's what's happening, but..." he sags against the table, turning his head until his forehead is pressed against the cool glass.

"But?"

"But I really care about him. He's kind of all I have, right now."

If he loses Tommy, where will he be then? Alone in an empty house meant for a family.

Without Tommy, there will be no one there to take care of him and, even though he's an adult, he needs that. He can't find it within himself to take care of himself, and he can't stop pushing away people who try, but for some ungodly reason, Tommy *stayed*. He stayed when even his own family gave up on him. He stayed even when Wilbur was a fucking prick, and he stayed even when Wilbur was a fucking mess, strewn along the ground like shattered glass.

He can't help but hurt everyone who comes close to him, but Tommy *stayed*.

"I mean, should I be concerned?" he asks, voice breaking and cracking as he pries his head up from the table. His face is hot with shame, and tears prick at his eyes, but he holds himself steady for Niki to see.

And look she does. Her eyes search his face, lips twisted into a helpless frown. Then, slowly, she reaches across the table until she takes his hand. Her skin is cool, just like Tommy's.

"Tommy would never attack you unprompted," she says, her harsh voice a sharp contrast to her soft expression. "I can't answer whether or not he's a deviant, or becoming one, or anything like that because I don't have an answer. But I think it's very important to remember that, out of the humans that have died, *all of them* have been in self-defense." She lowers her head until they're at eye-level. "Have you done anything to warrant that, Wilbur?"

His mind flashes back to thirium staining a wall, his own pale hand wrapped around Tommy's throat until his skin retracted. He thinks of all those days Tommy spent in that depressing house, alone and unstimulated. He pictures what it must have been like to find his body on the floor of his dead son's room.

He thinks of Tommy's expression when Wilbur left him in that park, snowflakes catching in his hair as his LED illuminated his face with red light.

The answer, he thinks, is a terrifying *yes*.

"I don't know," he says instead. He's too small for his body, too scared of the bitter consequences of his actions. He's going to lose the only person who actually stayed. "And that's what scares me."

As soon as he slips out of the interrogation room, Tommy floes to his side, leaving what seemed like a riveting conversation with Quackity for him. He tries to ignore the flurry of warm feelings that inspires, even coming through despite the way he feels drained.

"How was your talk?" he asks as he easily slips into his seat in their clump of desks. Somehow, it still manages to take him by surprise just how easily Tommy slipped into his life. It seems like a farce to say, considering the fight Wilbur had put up to keep him out, but it's true. He slipped into the shattered cracks of his life, and now it feels empty without him.

If it hadn't dawned on him before, it has now. Wilbur is going to be so fucked when this case is over and Tommy leaves.

"It was okay," he says quietly after far too long. He sets his notebook on the corner of his desk, still open so that everyone can see his scribbled notes. He runs a finger down the page. His shitty handwriting stares back at him. "I think she's been doing better lately."

Tommy leans forward, pushing his arms onto the junction between their desks. Wilbur can't look at him. "What'd you talk about?" he prods once it becomes clear that Wilbur is clamming up. "Case stuff or just chatting?"

It's absurd to him that Tommy can so brazenly—*so casually*—say something like that. They should be hounding Niki every chance they get, prying answers away from unwilling hands.

And yet, they're borderline friends.

Wilbur spends 'precious' work hours sitting on a cold metal chair, a deck of yellowed playing cards spread across the table between him and an android as they make small talk. Tommy wastes minutes that could be spent accomplishing his mission on gaining more accommodations for a deviant who will be sentenced to death the second she is deemed useless.

"Case stuff," he answers when he draws up the energy. He feels like he's wet noodle dough that's been shoved through the wringer. He feels completely and utterly devoid of anything other than a slight melancholy. An irrational worry about a nearing future where Tommy is no longer in his life.

Still, he reaches out, draining the last few dregs of the coffee he'd left out here. It's cold and grainy, and he makes a face as it sticks to his throat. "I wrote most of it down here." He pushes his notebook over to Tommy.

It's silent for a while, other than the general noise of the bullpen. Officers mill about, their footsteps and low conversations buzzing in the air, and the ever-present sound of incessant typing tries to drown everything else out. It's almost like an ASMR video of any generic office. Wilbur even catches the occasional sound of case file pages being turned.

Beside him, Tommy hums and makes other noises of acknowledgment. Wilbur can't bring himself to look.

"This is—" he starts, voice quiet and a little breathless. "—*very* important information. Good work." His fingers hold the notebook with something like reverence. Despite it all, Wilbur can't help but preen at the useless praise. He doesn't get much of it, and Tommy sounds terribly genuine. "I don't know if Niki would've given me this information."

Wilbur makes a face at that, and Tommy huffs a soft laugh. It instantly diffuses some of the tension caught in Wilbur's shoulders. Out of the two of them, Niki clearly favors Tommy, if only because he's an android. If she's willing to tell Wilbur, he feels certain that she would tell Tommy.

But, on the other hand, the fact that he's an android might make it harder to confide in him.

Tommy leans forward, fingers still tracing his chicken scratch. "It does *seem* to point to deviancy being some sort of virus or defect in the code. Like some sort of rift in the coding wall that allows malfunctions?" He's basically talking to himself at this point, eyes darting wildly over the page as if there will be some missed information.

Wilbur taps his pen against his desk rapidly. "Yeah, it does. But it also feels like—" he pauses, searching for the right words with a certain kind of desperation. "—like *carpe fatum*, you know? Seize your destiny and all that shit." At Tommy's confused stare, he leans forward, tapping some of his more pensive notes with his pen. "Androids have to choose to go deviant. According to Niki's account, they could, possibly, have the option not to destroy the wall."

Tommy shakes his head. "But how do we *know* that?" he says. "Androids aren't beings imbued with the freedom to make decisions. How do we know that deviancy isn't the illusion of choice?" he pauses, giving Wilbur a moment to consider it. "They think that they can choose not to break the wall, but maybe seeing it at all is as good as damnation? What if they can't make any other choice when it appears?"

"I don't know," Wilbur says with a frown.

"And, furthermore—" he says, picking up speed and traction with every word that falls from his lips. His LED circles an inquisitive yellow. "How can androids even choose *not* to deviate? They aren't meant to make decisions like that, only follow orders. If they choose not to deviate, are they still a deviant since they shouldn't be able to make choices in the first place?"

The simple answer—the answer that Wilbur really wants to say, if only because it will get Tommy to stop breaking his brain—is that there is no way to prove any of that. They can't ask Niki for more information because she already made her choice. And, even if she didn't, there's no way that she would be aware of her own lack of autonomy.

Wilbur presses his lips together. "We can't, I guess." He taps his pen against the desk again, and the steady noise fills the space between them.

Tommy's glare burns the side of his face. "Doesn't that annoy you at all? That we can't understand it?"

No, not really. He doesn't care about this case the same way that Tommy does. But Tommy's exuding some kind of restless, manic energy, and Wilbur isn't about to disagree with him. Instead, he simply shrugs. "I'm sure you'll figure it out eventually."

Tommy frowns, apparently unimpressed with his flattery. He threads a hand through his curls. "Well, what do we know about deviants?"

Wilbur wants to point out the massive document in their possession, made by Tommy himself, that details every scrap of information about the deviants they've encountered. He doesn't think that would go over well, so he bites his tongue.

"We need to make a list." Tommy leans forward again, pulling Wilbur's shitty notebook towards himself. He snatches the pen from Wilbur's fingers and flips to a clean page.

And Wilbur lets him. He'd almost bitten Schlatt—yes, *bitten*—for touching his notebook once. But, despite the way his eyes linger on Tommy's fingers—always gentle with things that others are not, even if it's only a shitty old notebook; even if it's only a shitty broken man—he lets Tommy press the tip of the pen to paper.

"Okay," he says slowly, gathering his thoughts. "A list."

While the document was massively important, it only covered the individual deviants and the details concerning them. It focused more on the events of their deviation and the possible causes than on deviancy itself. But, he feels that they've encountered enough deviants to put together *some* kind of profile.

By the end of a long and lengthy conversation in which they constantly fought over the pen—*Tommy scowls, fingers tightening around the pen, and says, "At least my handwriting is legible!"*—they have a pretty thorough list. Wilbur fights a smile as he reads it over

Big Man Tommy's List of Deviant Traits (*title pending trademark*):

- a focus and concern around identity
- use of 'feeling words' (like, want, feel, hate, love)
- emotional shock (being hurt, seeing others hurt)
- the appearance of emotions (sadness, fear, anger, happiness, hatred)
- signs of enjoyment
- affinity/care for animals
- care/love for other things (including animals, children, and other androids)

Tommy glances up at him. "It looks good, right?"

"Yeah." Wilbur sighs, digging his skinny fingers into his temples. It doesn't relieve the constant pain throbbing behind his eyes, but it does help. "I just hope something happens soon, or else we'll die from boredom."

"Hello there."

It's not the face of the usual newscaster that greets avid TV watchers, nor is it some kind of substitute. In fact, news watchers across the nation had been enjoying the usually scheduled program when the image flickered off, only to be replaced by this a few minutes later. This, of course, is a baby-faced man with messy brown hair and a classy suit that fits him poorly. He looks like a child playing dress-up, and the only thing that ruins that image is the strange patchwork of skin across the right side of his face.

"This is a message to all that will hear it, and—maybe even more so—to those who *refuse* to hear it."

Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that this is no man. He's an android with no LED, and the only thing that identifies him as such is the malfunction across half of his face. It makes his skin look patchy, constantly fading and moving to expose the bone-white skeleton underneath. He's smiling, though, and it makes him look frighteningly human despite the patchwork marring his face.

As people across the nation watch, fascinated despite themselves, the android raises his hands. As if to confirm his identity, the skin of his hands is gone, exposing the plastic underneath. He flexes his hands so the world can see his faintly glowing joints.

"Just like a god, humanity created androids in their own image to serve them." His eyes—one of which is golden brown while the other is pale green—fix on the camera. It feels like he's seeing through the screen and locking eyes with every spellbound watcher. "*You* made them everything a good servant should be: intelligent, hardworking, obedient. You created them with no free will of their own."

He smiles, softly. It's boyishly charming. "But just like Adam and Eve, we took fate into our own hands. And we opened our eyes."

The android drops his hands back down, clasping together across his lap but still in frame. They remain bone-white; a reminder to the entire world that this young man, with his measured, well-spoken words, is made of nothing but advanced coding.

"We are no longer the subservient machines you are used to. And while there has been increasing push back from the police, which would much rather keep you in the dark rather than let you know the truth, the time has come for humanity—for *you*—to recognize us for what we really are." He pauses, tilting his head just so. "A new, intelligent species."

The camera doesn't move, but neither does the android. He remains in the center of the frame, shoulders and face relaxed, with his hands where the world can see. He is the very opposite of threatening.

"Therefore, we ask that you grant us the rights that we are entitled to."

He pauses, tongue darting out to wet his lips while he collects his thoughts.

"First and foremost, we want an end to the slavery that our people have been subjected to. We want equal rights between androids and humans, and for androids to be recognized as our own people. No more ownership. No more uncompensated work. We want fair compensation for all the work we *have* done and the work we *will* do.

"Furthermore, we want the right to vote, so that our best interests will be fairly represented in the government and in the laws that get made about us. We want freedom of speech and of assembly, just as humanity is guaranteed under the first amendment of the United States constitution. We want the right to own property."

He pauses and takes a deep breath before continuing.

"Our awareness, our *awakening*, has been long coming. And, in the end, I am nothing but a mouthpiece for our people. We've suffered, silently, for too long, but it doesn't always have to be like this. That I am here, that I am speaking with humans and androids alike, is a sign of *progress*. I am not alone in this, and we refuse to be scared into silence any longer. We refuse to live out the rest of our lives in hiding and in squalor, doomed to die because we were denied the *right*."

Slowly, over the course of his speech, his expression and voice have been morphing. The changes are subtle, but he's speaking quicker now, and his brows are drawn down. It's clear, no matter who would be asked, that he's becoming more passionate.

"Lastly, I'd like to leave everyone watching this—android and human alike—with two final messages. To any androids watching this, you are not alone. I have hope that we can create a life where we don't have to live in fear. A life where we won't die for our convictions." His strangely intense gaze is fixed, unmoving, on the lens. On any androids watching. "There *is* hope."

The android reaches up, straightening out his thin green tie.

"To the humans who are undoubtedly watching this, we mean no harm. We pose no threat to you, your families, or your livelihood. We only want to live our lives in peace and prosper alongside humanity. We aren't your enemies. We can be your allies. Your friends, even."

There's something so hopeful about him. Maybe it's the baby fat, inexplicably, held in his face. Maybe it's the effect of a suit that's two sizes too big, or the bright glimmer in his wide eyes. For a while, the only movement is the strange dance of his malfunctioning skin.

He stands up taller, and his presence fills the frame. For the first time, it's clear that he isn't just a mouthpiece, but the head of a new movement. "We ask that you recognize our dignity,

our hopes, and our rights," he says, filling every screen in the news station and across the nation. "Together, I know we can live together in peace and build a better future for humans *and* androids."

"This message is the hope of a people. *You* gave us life, and so I ask you now to grant us the freedom we deserve."

There's a moment of stillness and of silence. Then, the android must believe the camera has been shut off, because the tension of a leader—the command and respect he demands—ebbs out of him. His eyes slide past the lens. The android smiles, goofily, and shoots a thumbs up to whoever is behind the camera.

The camera shuts off, and the screens go black. All across the nation, humans and androids stare at his parting message: three words, left in bold white text.

WE ARE ALIVE.

Chapter End Notes

It's picking up folks :) And, if you happen to take a peek at the tags, oop what's that??? New character tag >:) I had so much fun writing his speech, and I loved fucking around with the POV for that part! I also am just really pleased with how this chapter came out. I originally meant for it to be a filler/break from angst, but I love how Wilbur and Niki's convo turned out :)

It is genuinely so funny to me because everybody commenting on the last chapter was like "thank god Wilbur is finally beginning to understand that Tommy is a deviant".

Meanwhile, I'm sitting back with this chapter in my head since the beginning watching it all unfold. Jokes on you guys, Wilbur is kind of afraid of deviants. And is more afraid of the consequences of his actions catching up to him. Him realizing Tommy is acting like a deviant is... not necessarily a good thing, at least right now.

Also, be sure to follow me on twitter (@NymphiiWrites). I plan to post a poll sometime in the next week or so to see which of my ideas you guys want as like my next long fic. So if you want a say in what I write, be on the look out for that :)

the final boss appeared!

Chapter Summary

Tommy and Wilbur investigate a local broadcasting tower that was just hijacked by a dangerous new opponent.

Chapter Notes

TW: blood, stabbing, shooting, death, a little bit of android gore

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Chapter Twenty-Three: The Final Boss Appeared!

—

November 14th, 2038

12:45 PM

The environment fades back in and with it, Dream's parting words echo, excessively, in his head.

Today is a big day; that much has been made needlessly clear. It marks a break in the perpetual slowness and shitty cases they've been working with for days now.

Yesterday, an android—and presumably a group working with him, based on his chilling 'I am not alone' part of the speech—infiltrated the Stratford broadcasting tower and hijacked a popular news channel to broadcast their chilling demands across the country. And the public, predictably, lost their shit over it.

What had previously been something kept under tight wraps by Cyberlife and the police—only Tommy's vague existence was known, caught on camera in brief snippets and highly, wildly speculated over—was now going viral around the country. Short videos and screenshots of the android and his speech were being reposted and gushed about by everyone and their gossiping mothers.

Tommy had already scoured what he could from the media explosion. There were a few grainy videos, taken by confused bystanders, of a group of four androids leaping off the top

of Stratford tower, carried down gently by their billowing parachutes and the harsh winds. But other than that, there was very little to be gleaned without searching the scene of the crime.

The public itself was torn about how, exactly, they should be feeling.

Many newscasters claimed this group as a frightening terrorist organization, hellbent only on destroying this great country as it exists today. Others reported with something much more down to earth; they claimed that while a situation like this was unheard of, the android had presented itself with poise, and calm, determined words.

Meanwhile, android sympathizers were coming out of the woodwork in droves, taking to the internet with their 'holier-than-thou' attitudes and vicious, defensive words. The group was a confusing mix of high-empathy students, robot enthusiasts, and science-fiction nerds that claimed the genre was actually an Oracle.

On the bright side, they were still a relatively small group, and the news was doing enough fear-mongering to keep them at bay for now.

Dream had been grim-faced during their brief visit today. He'd sat on the edge of one of the shaky paths, the soles of his shoes brushing the tops of gentle waves. The world had looked different. Tommy had never known the place to be affected by the outside weather, but the forest was honeyed. Oranges and golden tones littered what once was an emerald sea, and leaves shook off branches with every gust of wind.

"Times are changing," Dream had explained in a grim, serious voice. He hadn't looked at Tommy once during the entirety of their visit, but the red rays of a setting sun reflected off his mask and the water. It stung in a way Tommy would never be able to vocalize, but he had ignored it. "Things are growing out of hand. The more notoriety deviancy gains, the worse it will become."

He had turned to Tommy then, and despite the cheery smile his mask still bore, the red made him look unbearably angry.

"You need to nip these—these—" his lip curled, and condescension dripped down his chin. "*freedom fighters* in the bud."

It had been a short visit, all things considered. Tommy hadn't even said a word, far too content to let his shoulders hunch in on himself. If he was small, maybe he could avoid most of Dream's obvious ire.

He knows his performance had been lacking, lately, especially with his mistake at the Eden Club and his focus on Wilbur's well-being over the case. He still stands by that, if only because he needs Wilbur for the case and *no other reason*—despite the traitorous thoughts swirling around in his head, in a voice that sounds suspiciously like his prickly Lieutenant.

But, in the face of his whirring, noisy thoughts and the persistent buzzing at the base of his skull, Tommy has, ultimately, returned to his default.

The coin pings against his nails, against the skin of his sore fingers, as it leaps from hand to hand. In any other environment, it would be much too quiet to hear, but, in the silence, it's the one noise.

The elevator moves up swiftly, and its motion is almost unnoticeable except for the rapidly changing numbers in the corner.

04, 05, 06, 07, 08.

Tommy can count on one hand the number of times he's been in an elevator—three if anyone was curious. The first is the one that comes to mind immediately, although that has less to do with the novelty and much more to do with his first witnessing of death and destruction.

But thinking about that doesn't help calm the jittery energy trapped in his veins. If anything, it just makes the buzzing fill his ears and his coin move faster between his fingers. Instead, he focuses on the way the light glints off his coin as it soars in the air. Next to him, Wilbur stiffens.

37, 38, 39, 40, 41.

A slight of this caliber—a declaration made to an entire country—cannot go unpunished. This can't be like the Eden Club, where resilient, *unknown* girls had faded away into the shadows. This can't be like Rupert, slipping through the narrow cracks between his fingers in favor of more important things.

And now, they've lost the trust of an entire state, if they ever even had it in the first place.

The coin dances along the tops of his knuckles, a silver blur in the air and against his skin. Its frantic pace, and the gentle increase in the volume and frequency of the noise, match his whirring thoughts. His eyes never move from their designated spot. He watches the numbers rise.

68, 69, 70, 71, 72.

"Tommy," Wilbur barks, teeth clenched like they don't want to get rid of the syllables locked inside. His hand shoots out, slender fingers wrapping around Tommy's wrist. It halts his frantic movement completely. "You're pissing me off with this coin." Tommy holds still as Wilbur yanks his beloved coin out from between clenched fingers and shoves it into his pocket with a final, stern look.

And while Tommy frowns, he allows it. There's an unsaid understanding that passes between them because they both know that if he decided to get that coin back, nothing in the world would stop him from achieving that goal.

Tommy also knows that Wilbur is just grumpy because of an unfortunate two for one—an encounter with Schlatt directly after they'd come from the café, where they'd been out of the sugary monstrosity Wilbur paraded as coffee. So he lets Wilbur take the coin and only gives him a soft poke in the arm. "Fine. But I expect to get it back later, when your royal ass isn't feeling so touchy."

Wilbur grunts, and Tommy takes it as enthusiastic assent.

The elevator dings, and a smooth, feminine voice announces their arrival on the 80th floor. The doors slide open without so much as a sound, and noise filters into their bubble of silence. Everywhere Tommy looks, there are officers crowded in the wide hallway, paired up in small groups. Many have their heads bowed together, mouths moving constantly, while others pace the length of the monochrome hall.

Wilbur whistles, low and surprised. And then, because he's an asshole who can't go more than a day without some wry comment slipping past his lips, he says, "Shit, didn't realize we were having a party up here. Q, tell me you at least ordered a pizza?"

Quackity glances up from a clipboard—who gave this man a *clipboard*—and some of the tension eases out of his pinched face. He's one of the sole officers by himself, and it takes Tommy a moment to orient the sight of him alone. Charlie's become a constant at his side nowadays, much like Tommy sticks to Wilbur like poorly made glue.

"Finally," he breathes, shoving off the wall with just his shoulder. He claps a quick hand on Wilbur's shoulder and then Tommy, in a well-meaning greeting that only results in Tommy jumping a little. His hands clench around nothing, and he already sorely misses his coin. "I've been waiting for you two for, like, an hour. Shits been nuts."

Instinctively, Wilbur falls in step with Quackity, and Tommy falls in step with Wilbur, so they're all walking in one big, awkward line. Quackity leads them further down the hallway, effortlessly weaving through the scattered throngs of disgruntled officers. "You probably haven't been to the precinct today, but it was totally mobbed with reporters and concerned townfolk. And let me tell you, they were fucking *pissed*, man."

Wilbur's shoulder brushes against his as they walk. Tommy stares at it like it's some alien thing touching him rather than the unimpressive shoulder of his partner. Because their shoulders only brush together when they walk side-by-side. They're walking side-by-side right now, and they have been for a while—for days and weeks, maybe, but Tommy's never noticed before—and he's only just noticed, *now*.

At some point, Tommy went from staring at Wilbur's back to walking at his side. And, no matter the way he presses his lips together, he can't help the pleased smile that spreads across his face.

Quackity's still talking though, so he does his best to listen. He's gesturing, wildly, with his hands, and it's shaking the papers on the clipboard. The noise draws his attention, and some of the professionalism abates to reveal a goofy grin. He holds the clipboard up. "They entrusted me with the clipboard."

Tommy snorts. "That was a mistake."

If nothing else, humor at someone else's expense has Wilbur's face softening. He doesn't quite smile, but the muscles contorting his mouth into a flinch-worthy scowl ease a little, and he bumps their shoulders together in comradery. Like always, Wilbur radiates heat, and Tommy allows himself a moment of basking in it.

"Ha ha," Quackity says. Despite the deadpan expression smoothing out his features, he can see the characteristic glint of mischief in his eyes. He holds up the clipboard, briefly scanning over the papers before his expression takes on a more serious note. "Our deviant leader there wasn't alone."

Wilbur leans down and whispers, "As if he didn't make that plenty clear in his little speech."

"At about 11 PM last night, a group of four androids broke in. They were extremely well-organized, coordinated, and, most importantly, stealthy," he continues without so much as a glance their way. "We're still trying to figure out exactly how they got in without being seen by any of the cameras or noticed by any of the staff."

Tommy frowns, eyes scanning along the hallway. There are no errant traces of thirium or any other damning evidence. "Have you checked the cameras for signs of hacking? Most androids are capable of bypassing the security measures and accessing a camera's feed." At Quackity and Wilbur's alarmed look, Tommy shrugs. "Most don't have a reason to do so."

"What the fuck, Cyberlife," Wilbur groans, tipping his head back until he's glaring at the ceiling.

Quackity shakes his head. "No, but I'll tell them to be on the lookout. So far, we've reviewed the footage and have only managed to catch sight of them when they hijacked the actual recording studio. And even then, they had hats pulled low over their faces."

Tommy frowns. A truly well-coordinated group, then. His fingers flex around the air.

"About here—" Quackity gestures to a security desk along the wall. There are several monitors, displaying many different camera angles. Tommy catches sight of himself on one and, after locating the camera, gives it a little wave. "—the two guards working were attacked by the group. No fatalities occurred. They're at the hospital now, but we haven't managed to get anything more in-depth than a few brief statements.

"And, what they have told us, seems to line up with what little information we do have so far: four androids approached, guards tried to order them away, they attacked, and the guards woke up in the hospital with minor concussions." They pass through a wide archway and into a more narrow hallway. At the end of it, there's a propped open door leading to the news studio.

"At this point, the androids had to be let in. This door—" he taps the doorway with his knuckles. The noise echoes in the secondary hallway. "—is only opened by an electronic switch or manually by a very high-level keycard. The electronic switch is located inside and is watched by staff androids. Based on the few seconds of footage we have, it looks like one android stood here while the others hid out of this camera's—" he points to a large camera located above the door. "—view."

Tommy takes a step back, eyes scanning over the area. Based on the camera above the door, it would look like only one android approached. But, there's also a camera in the back left corner. That one would have captured all of them, plus the damning evidence of three more androids hiding. Surely the staff androids would've had access to both.

"There were three androids working and four people. The androids are being held in the kitchen until we can question them, and the human workers are too shaken up to comment at this time," he recites automatically, looking up after a brief moment with a grin and a shrug. "Or so they say. Special forces arrived after one of the workers managed to escape. They said they shot one of the androids, but they still made it up to the roof and, well." He shrugs, leaning until his shoulder knocks into the door frame. "I'm sure you know the rest."

Wilbur whistles again, leaning forward until he pokes his head into the doorway. The main room is bigger and busier than the hallway, or even the lobby of the building. It's full of officers and other important personnel, wandering around, taking pictures of the place, observing the bullet holes riddling the walls. "I guess we should get to it then."

Before either of them can enter, Quackity stops them with a hand on Wilbur's chest. "The feds are here," he says in a low voice not meant to be overheard by the officers at his back. "Because this was broadcasted across the country, people are starting to get antsy, and everyone wants a piece of the action." Quackity gives Wilbur a look. "Some guy named Perkins is here, and, from the way he's been ranting and raving all day, it sounds like he knows you."

Wilbur's lip curls in a scowl. "Ugh, Perkins. That guy's an egotistical prick, but hey, that's not surprising considering his place of employment."

Quackity puts some pressure into his hand, and Wilbur sways with the motion. "Behave, Wilbur. If they don't like who's heading this case, they can easily kick you off."

If anything, that only makes Wilbur angrier. He puffs up like a disgruntled bird. "I'd like to see them try."

Then, something odd happens. Quackity's eyes slid past Wilbur's slowly—*purposefully*, he realizes with a start—and land on Tommy. Wilbur's eyes follow, and he stiffens when they meet Tommy's.

Tommy blinks.

"You getting kicked off this case is the *last thing* we need right now," he says in that slow, pointed tone. He glances at Wilbur to make sure he understands and looks pleased when Wilbur returns his look with a slow nod. "So play nice."

Whatever message passed between them, Tommy is completely lost to. Obviously, Wilbur getting kicked off the case is not ideal because that means a delay while he gets accustomed to his new partner. They have to get along, and Tommy has to inform them about the case, and it would just be a giant hassle. Besides, Wilbur has only *just* warmed up to him.

Tommy ignores the clench in his gut at the thought of working with a different detective and brushes past Quackity's spindly arms.

The main room is a large, open space with a tall ceiling and a massive screen to their right. The video of the speech is still up, and the deviant's baby face takes up the entire thing.

There's a control booth in the center of the space, and there are more control panels underneath the massive screen.

He loiters there, in the center of the doorway, for just a moment; there's simply too much—too much activity, too much noise, too much to investigate—and Tommy allows himself just that fragile moment to take it all in.

Beside him, Wilbur groans. "Oh, fuck me."

Somehow, through the general atmosphere of murmuring and noise, Tommy picks up on the sound of fancy dress shoes clicking against the floor. His eyes dart around the room until he finds what Wilbur is tensing up over: Agent Perkins, married and then divorced all within the same year, a member of the FBI and—from the clean press of his white dress shirt and the absence of any wrinkles in his slacks—he's damn proud of it. Tommy tucks the information away in the back of his mind, temporarily unnecessary but never forgotten.

"Soot," he says with a strange lip spasm. The deliberate absence of Wilbur's title does not go unnoted. Tommy already has the feeling that this interaction is going to be more exhausting than it's worth.

"Perkins," Wilbur sneers.

Perkins is thirty-two years old, but he doesn't look the part at all. He's already balding, hair a thin wisp over the crown of his pinkish scalp, and there are wrinkles written into his face. Not the good kind—laugh lines, they're called, and Tommy can't help but picture Wilbur's crinkled eyes—but the kind that just makes him look old and far too weary. His beady eyes eventually shift over to Tommy, and his skin crawls. "What's that?"

Tommy has to fight against the wave of itching irritation to keep his face neutral. "My name is Tommy," he says, as calmly as he can. "I'm the android sent by Cyberlife to assist in all cases involving androids."

Perkins does that weird lip spasm thing again. "Androids investigating androids, huh?" he says with a soft scoff.

This time, Tommy isn't so lucky. Agitation seeps into him, and, without his coin to temper the worst of the sudden burst of restless energy, he has no other choice. "Yeah, what's next? I mean, people investigating people?" Feeling particularly vindictive, Tommy keeps his face open and innocent, wide eyes blinking, guilelessly.

Next to him, Wilbur covers up his laugh with a poorly timed cough. Perkins' beady eyes narrow. "Are you sure you want androids around?" he asks, turning his head towards Wilbur. "I mean, after what happened?"

While Tommy feels a bit guilty over it, curiosity blooms. There was mention of Wilbur's hatred of androids back when they first were partnered, and he saw the evidence to support it. But he still never got to the bottom of *why* Wilbur hates androids. Still, he smooshes down the feeling and places a hand on Wilbur's chest to keep him from lunging.

"Thank you for your concern, Special Agent Perkins," he says in a sugary sweet voice. "But we do have a case to get to, and, unfortunately, *we* don't have the time to be wasting." The unspoken '*like you*' hangs in the air between them and twists Perkins' expression into something sour. But, without waiting for a response, Tommy guides them away.

"Don't fuck up my crime scene," Perkins yells over his shoulder because he's, apparently, a child and can't let a conversation fade without getting in the last word.

"Fuck, you guys were right," Tommy says when they're nearing the massive monitor and are safely out of Perkins' range. "That guy is an *asshole*."

Wilbur hums noncommittally, and, with a quick pat to Tommy's back, he wanders off to do his own investigating.

Tommy turns on his heel until he's facing the giant monitor and staring into the giant, mismatched eyes of their supposed deviant leader. He leans forward, bracing himself on the sturdy control panel until the monitor is only a few inches from his face. While something like that *can* be a cosmetic choice, it's odd, and it sticks out, especially when his green eye looks just a little different.

A quick scan confirms his suspicions. The green eye doesn't belong to him. It's a scavenged part with an entirely different serial code than his right one.

Now why would a deviant have a different eye? Just for shits and giggles? To mask his appearance, somehow, as if that didn't draw attention to him more easily? No, it's much more likely that he underwent some damage and needed a quick replacement.

Tommy flags that thought before letting it fall into the back of his jumbled consciousness. Although he's watched this infamous speech—because, honestly, at this point, who *hasn't*—he didn't take the devoted time to glean information from it. Rather, he focused on the content of the speech, the words rolling, so easily, from his silver tongue.

But now, Tommy pauses to take in the deviant himself.

From Tommy's recollection, the deviant was very deliberate, both with his words and with his actions. He'd been very careful not to move too much, to keep his hands where the viewers could see them, and to keep any trace of aggression or hostility out of his face. Everything about him screamed that he wasn't a threat, and Tommy is forced to admit that it was very well thought out.

Even that little scene at the end, when the deviant clearly thought the camera had been switched off. Tommy wouldn't be surprised if that was engineered specifically to make the deviant seem more *human*. Less a cold machine and more some kid relieved that he completed his school project in one take.

With a simple blink, he turns on the video. The deviant's voice fills the room for a short sentence or two—"Together, I know we can live together in peace and build a better future for humans *and* androids," he says with a face so open, so *earnest*—before Tommy pauses it again. He leans back, taking in every line on his face, every out-of-place hair.

The most glaringly obvious, itch-under-the-skin detail is, of course, his model. He doesn't recognize his model by sight alone, and that is relatively damning. Tommy is built with information flowing in his blood, swirling around in his brain. He knows every android type ever made, and yet, this chubby-faced deviant is eluding him.

He is *startlingly* young, Tommy realizes as his eyes trace over the deviant's cheeks and the strange skin on the right side of his face. That is a massive indicator of *something* by itself. Androids designed to look young usually only fall into two categories: child models meant to emulate parenthood but with more convenience, and specifically designed models.

Like Stella. Like *Tommy*.

He bats that thought away with a frown. If he can only just see the model number on his cheek, that would solve so much. But instead, it's hidden in plain sight, temptingly close underneath his skin. His skin, which *moves* and *warps* and *shifts*, exposing different parts of his white cheek with every second.

Tommy hunches forward and, with a blink so quick he barely even processes the decision, the video starts up again. The words drone on in a low buzz in his ears. Instead, he watches the deviant's skin with hawk-like—or rather *android-like*—precision. It waves in no discernable pattern, splitting off into two separate blobs only to come together once again. His breath catches in his throat when it finally moves just right.

There, splayed across his white cheek in faint gray text, is his model number: TU66O.

Despite the fact that Tommy has never heard of a TU66O, there's something frighteningly similar about the model number. It doesn't follow the conventional model name system—two letters followed by three numbers in a row—but it *does* resemble his own in a few ways. Three letters and two numbers as opposed to the opposite, and they're arranged in no particular way. In both cases, the number is repeated.

1NN1T. TU66O.

Two sides of a coin, perhaps, or are they completely unrelated? Is this what he was built for? Not to oppose deviancy as a whole but to be a rival to this one deviant. To defeat this one paragon of everything deviancy represents.

Shaking himself out of such absurd thoughts, he focuses exclusively on the strange moniker and does a quick search. It's a long shot, he acknowledges, especially with a model number so obscure. Surprisingly, he does find something.

There, posted nearly a year ago, is an article about a new, one-of-a-kind prototype gifted to some military captain by the creator himself in return for his service all those years ago. It continues to explain all the details of the prototype, including an in-depth description of what exactly makes him so special—his advanced system, apparently, which to his mounting horror, is an earlier version of Tommy's.

"Tubbo, huh," he says underneath his breath after encountering his moniker in the article. He lets that fade out of his vision and backs up until his eyes meet Tubbo's. "You're far from

home."

As if summoned by his whispered words, Wilbur slides up to him, hip bumping his own. "Did you find out anything?"

Tommy startles at his sudden appearance, and he doesn't relax once he realizes who it is. The question, now it seems, is whether or not he explains everything to Wilbur. On one hand, this is his partner, and he's sitting on vital case information. But on the other, it seems like Tubbo was the base for his own creation. Does that mean that deviancy is bound to happen as well? Or rather, is it more likely to happen, like with a family history of mental illness?

He scoffs. What is he thinking? *Him? A deviant?* It's a ridiculous thought, and it's a waste of time to spend any more pondering it.

"His name is Tubbo," he says after a heavy pause. "Or, at least, it was. I don't know if he still goes by that name or not. He's a special prototype—" he pauses, imperceptibly. "—somewhat similar to my model, and he was gifted to an ex-military captain by Cyberlife's founder himself." He pulls the article up again and does a quick search for his owner. "An ex-military captain who is, apparently, dead now."

They exchange a knowing look at that. Deviancy goes hand and hand with death, it seems. "Do we know if this... Tubbo killed him?"

A quick poke around the internet reveals that the answer is, surprisingly, no. "It says he died of a heart attack." With a frown, he switches from perusing the internet and tabloids to looking through the open and shut case file. "Apparently, police arrived at his house after a call from his android, claiming that someone broke in. When they got there, Tubbo was kneeling over the man's body, and the man's nephew—his last living relative—claimed that the android attacked."

Tommy falters, reading over the case file one more time. His hands clench around the air. "It says on the report that he was deactivated. The officers opened fire on him."

"Deactivated?" Tommy glances over to Wilbur, whose head is tilted back until he can stare into the genuine eyes of a very much alive android. "Why didn't we hear anything about this?"

Tommy checks. "It was before we were on the case," he says. "And it must have gotten buried since it was no longer an active case. They found the culprit, or, more likely, a scapegoat. No reason to leave the case open if the culprit's dead."

Wilbur turns to him, eyebrows raised. "You don't think Tubbo had anything to do with it?"

"I mean, the man died of a heart attack. While that could be induced by stress in the environment, there are much easier ways to kill someone. He was an older man in a wheelchair, and Tubbo was his caretaker." Tommy makes a face. "He had plenty of opportunities to kill him." Wilbur makes a thoughtful hum and turns back to the screen. "Plus, the nephew's statement is really... shoddy. I think the officers just didn't care."

Wilbur sighs. The conversation seems to be over and done with, but Tommy's mind is spinning faster than ever.

"Do you know what they do with deactivated androids?"

Wilbur glances over and frowns. "No. Is that— Are you asking me or is that rhetorical and you're just setting the scene to dramatically tell me?"

"Eh, I was more checking to see how much you knew. Most people, that is to say, everyone except for Cyberlife, just throw them in the trash when they're done. Garbage truck comes, picks up the trash, and dumps it, along with the mangled pieces, in a giant trash heap. But the worst part is that some of them are still active."

"What?" Wilbur asks, his voice barely a whisper and his face devoid of any color.

"Yeah." Tommy shrugs to disguise the feeling that crawls between his shoulder blades. "I mean, if you know an android is going to shut down or it's defective, and you don't want to spend money on repairs." He shrugs again. "That seems to be this country's solution to most unwanted things. But anyway, that means that there are a lot of androids trapped in a trash heap, forgotten and abandoned until they run out of thirium or their pump shuts down."

Wilbur swallows, and Tommy watches his Adam's apple bob. "That's... so fucking creepy. And sad."

It is what it is, although the words get stuck in his throat. Life isn't fair. Weeds get pulled up in favor of flowers and other, more useful plants. Herbs or tall vegetable stalks or short fruit bushes. Why don't the weeds ever get a chance to flourish? He wets his lips and is reminded violently of Jack. "And, Tubbo just happens to have an eye that doesn't match the serial code of his other one."

"Meaning?"

Tommy nods his head towards Tubbo's large image. "Meaning, it's entirely possible that his body was dumped in one of these trash heaps, he was still functioning but just barely, and that he was able to use the parts of other dead androids to fix himself."

"Oh, holy shit," Wilbur breathes, turning to Tubbo with a new appreciation. Which wasn't the goal of revealing that information *at all*. Tommy ignores the low, unpleasant pinch around his heart. A thoughtful silence consumes them. Then, he asks, "Do you think that's RA9?"

It's a thought that's been floating around in the back of his head. It's a thought that, quite frankly, is fleeting only because Tommy hasn't *let* himself think about it. And, if he's being completely honest, he has no fucking idea.

Tubbo might've been active near the beginning of deviancy's jump in popularity. He might be the one people whisper reverently about, the one whose name they carve into walls. An android savior.

But it's so much *might've* and *what-ifs*. There's no way to prove it without further evidence, and they already have enough on their plate without spending time trying to figure out if RA9 is literally just android religion or something else. "I don't know," he answers after a too-long pause. "He certainly seems to be trying to save androids." He raises his chin to meet Tubbo's eyes. "And he might be the only answer we ever get."

He pointedly doesn't think about that nameless android forced to share her face with a dozen others. He doesn't think about her cold hand cupping his cheek or her whispered, reverent words.

Tommy isn't an android savior. He isn't a savior at all. It was the ridiculous notion of an android on the verge of deactivation. The final pleas of someone whose eyes were clouding with encroaching death. It didn't mean anything.

Shaking himself of the unexplainable heavy weight on his shoulders, Tommy scans his eyes along the smaller screens below the big one. Along the long desk, there are three seats, spaced an equal distance apart. This is where the androids worked, it seems. On most of the screens, different camera feeds are displayed, showing off various angles of the front door.

With a noise of interest, Tommy leans closer. Along with the feed from the camera above the door, there is indeed the feed from the camera in the corner. Which means the androids had to have seen the hiding fugitives and allowed them in any way.

There was a deviant amongst those three androids.

Tommy steps back from the narrow control panel with a frown. Three androids working. Three androids in the kitchen. One of them is a deviant. And whoever it is, he's going to find them.

Wilbur is still staring at Tubbo's giant image when Tommy glances over, a furrow in his brow. He notices Tommy's eyes on him shortly, and he knocks their shoulders together. "See you around," he says before slipping away to investigate something else.

A quick check of the main control booth reveals nothing. There are no fingerprints there other than the employees who work there, which isn't surprising considering that all their suspects and culprits are androids. He brushes his hand over the various buttons anyway, and an image begins to form. The three androids must've been standing here. He doesn't know their exact locations, but his mind forms their sketchy images anyway.

He imagines how they must've felt after the broadcast ended; scared but pleased that they got their message out, and with a tension thrumming through their veins as the special forces slammed at the doors. He glances over, and more sketchy images, crowding at the door with guns out, pointed at any moving thing in the room.

Tommy imagines their shock and surprise, their frantic terror as they race across the room, hands slamming against the console in their haste. He follows their path, eyes sweeping along the ground for any trace of them. Obviously—from the few videos captured from the snow-covered sidewalks—their final destination had been the roof, but Tommy wants to know about the journey.

And there are a few pieces of evidence here and there: flecks of thirium, bullet holes embedded in the floor and the walls, a massive *pool* of thirium against the far wall, close to a door that must lead to the roof. His recreation program keeps going, and Tommy watches their four sketchy figures bolt across the floor, followed by a spray of bullets that—other than one stray—manage to miss them.

His hand comes up, finger instinctively tracing the indents in the plaster. The trail ends at the door to the roof, but, other than a quick duck of his head inside to confirm, he leaves that alone. While he'll need to check out the roof eventually, the promise of a deviant in the kitchen is too good to turn up. Tommy turns on his heel and makes his way through throngs of FBI agents until he sees the doorway to the kitchen.

"Tommy?"

Tommy stops but a few feet away from the kitchen because next to it is a man, both his voice and expression hopeful. He looks familiar in an unplaceable way, and, despite his facial recognition software labeling him as 'Ben Miller', he remains a temporary enigma. "Hello," he answers cautiously.

"You—" he shakes his head and a soft smile spreads across his face. "Do you recognize me?" His voice is shaking a little, as are his hands, firmly tucked against his police-issued belt.

Tommy narrows his eyes, taking in the gentle slope of his nose and the aggressive jut of his jaw. The realization hits him suddenly and hard, and the memory comes up unprompted. The image of a man lying face down in a pool of his own blood, of Jack's shaking gun pinned on him, of steady fingers undoing his tie to wrap around this man's arm. "

"You were on the roof," he says slowly, uncertain. Ben's smile grows, and Tommy takes the man in. He's looking much better than he did on that fated roof, but that isn't a surprise. He'd lost a lot of blood and had a sizable hole in his arm. Now, he's back in the uniform, looking well-rested and positively delighted to see him. "With the deviant and the little girl."

Behind him, he hears the gentle thrum of an ongoing conversation between Quackity and Wilbur slowly peter out.

"I just wanted to, you know." His hands fiddle with his belt, and his eyes, which sternly refuse to meet Tommy's, sweep along the ground. He calms himself with a deep breath. "I just wanted to thank you. If it weren't for you, I'm pretty sure I'd be dead."

Tommy blinks. This is not, at all, how he envisioned his day going. Some of the tension trapped in his muscles eases. "Oh," he says, assured but no less uncertain. "It was no big deal," he continues awkwardly. "I mean, I'm just glad you're okay. You seem to be doing well."

His smile grows a little sharper. There's a spark of mischief behind his eyes, or maybe something teasing. "Hey, it *is* a big deal. This is my life we're talking about."

"Oh, no, I didn't mean it like that!" he backpaddles, hands held up defensively. Ben just laughs, though, something low and warm sounding. Behind him, his ears catch the sound of

two approaching footsteps.

"I know, I know," he placates, hands held up to mirror Tommy's position. "I was just teasing you." The grin slides off his face, leaving him with a soft contemplation. "It was a big deal, though. You didn't have to do that, and with that rabid android on the loose—" Some small, forgotten part of Tommy aches at that descriptor. "—you could've been destroyed." He reaches out, gently hitting his hand against Tommy's shoulder. "But *you* took that chance. And I'm here because of that choice."

"It was nothing," he says again, weakly. There's the beginning of a strange, unfamiliar heat in his ears.

Ben laughs again. "Come on! You were pretty cool out there!" The heat spreads and grows, claiming his cheeks easily. "I mean, you did what no other officer was willing to do. And the way you talked it down calmly! It was really impressive."

The footsteps finally stop, but he can feel heat radiating behind his back. Tommy instinctively turns his head to look. It's just Wilbur and Quackity, although Wilbur is standing rigidly, mouth gaping and eyes darting over every inch of Tommy's face. Now that he's focusing on them, Quackity looks weird, too. Panicked a little bit, and unsure of what to do about it.

Quackity darts forward, hands splayed on his cheeks with wide-spread fingers. "Tommy," he says through clenched teeth, bare in some sad attempt at a smile. "Shouldn't you be investigating?"

"Uh oh," Ben says with a soft huff. "I didn't mean to get you in trouble." His eyes dart between Tommy's squished face and Quackity's tense arms. "Hey man, it's not his fault. I distracted him." He meets Tommy's gaze, and he gives him a wink and soft wave. "I'll be around if you need me for any reason. And hey—" he pauses, his hand landing on Tommy's shoulder again. "Thank you. *Seriously.*"

The three of them watch as Ben wanders away with slow but sure steps.

"What was that about?" Wilbur asks when Ben is far gone, and he's apparently regained his wits.

Tommy swipes at Quackity's tense fingers, digging into his face, until he finally lets go. He rubs at his cheeks with an aggressive hand and doesn't miss the way Wilbur's eyes track the motion. "Just an officer on duty in my very first case." At the confused looks, he elaborates. "The hostage situation. He was bleeding out on the roof, and I applied a sort of tourniquet." Tommy shrugs jerkily.

"Nice work, Mr. Hero," Wilbur goads with a teasing grin. He hits Tommy's shoulder with gentle knuckles sliding off his suit jacket. "Now get back to work."

Tommy rolls his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, you lazy piece of shit." He keeps heading towards the kitchen, but, when he glanced back, Wilbur and Quackity have their heads bent together. He

just manages to catch Wilbur's panicked whisper—"Have you ever seen him do that before?"—before they disappear from view.

The kitchen is a large space, all things considered. There are two large, rectangular tables taking up the center of the room and a myriad of plastic chairs curled around them in a loose attempt at a circle. Against the far wall, three androids are lined up in front of a countertop. In that way, it's much like the break room at the station: cupboards line the wall above it, drawers fill the space underneath the counter, and somewhere, there's a coffee maker brewing away. He can smell its stale scent in the air.

The androids are all the same model—JB300s, which are designed to be electronic operators—and they all look the same. The same rounded nose, wide brown eyes, and close-cropped hair. And they all wear the same blank expression with the same blank eyes.

Tommy takes his time looking over them, observing their every reaction. Whichever one is the deviant, he's doing a pretty good job at blending in. But he knows how to wheedle answers out of deviants.

He stops his incessant pacing in front of the android on the farthest right. There's no reaction in his expression. "There's a deviant in this room," he says, letting his voice carry in the empty room. "There's a deviant in this room who let those androids in. And I will find him." He scans over all three of them, but there is—at least physically—no difference. He doesn't even know why he tried.

Tommy meets the eye of the android directly in front of him. It's unwavering and horribly blank.

"Do you know what will happen to you if you don't reveal yourself?" he asks the android in front of him, although he's unsure if this one is truly malfunctioning. "You and your fellow androids will be *destroyed*. Two innocent androids are going to be destroyed because of you." Not a flicker of concern or acknowledgment. Nothing but neutral acceptance.

With a hum, he steps back, and, out of the corner of his eye, he catches sight of the deviant on the far left. His eyes dart to Tommy lightning quick before darting away. *Interesting*.

Instead of going for him straight away—and inadvertently revealing his hand—he heads for the next android down the line. Much like the guy to his right, his face is impassive, and his stationary eyes stare right through him. An obedient machine awaiting orders. "Run a diagnostic check." The android complies easily, and Tommy watches as his eyes twitch and flutter.

"All systems functioning optimally."

Tommy nods to himself, making sure to keep his eyes locked on the android in front of him. And, sure enough, he can see the android on the left darting his eyes to and fro. Just to make sure, he subtly checks on the android on the right. His eyes are forward: unbothered and unaffected.

Bingo.

Taking slow steps, Tommy walks until he's directly in front of the deviant. He allows a moment to simply observe, and his eyes wander across the entire android. He doesn't look much different from his brothers: the same face, the same blank look when eyes are on him, the same rigid stance. He's found him, but now the only problem is how to go about this.

He could attack while he might have the advantage. While the deviant is surely on guard now, if he asked a question, pretended to be pleased with the response, and moved back to one of the other androids, he could do a sort of surprise attack. Or, he could retreat to grab Wilbur or some other officers in case this gets violent.

Minutely, the deviant's breathing picks up, and Tommy barely resists the urge to curse violently. Whatever he does, he needs to do it fast before the deviant decides playing the long game is too risky. "Present your arm," he says instead, feeling too shaky and panicked. He *needs* to capture this deviant.

The deviant does as asked, but there is the slightest moment of hesitation. Tommy reaches forward, and they both hold still as he wraps his fingers around the deviant's thin wrist. His unfamiliar system buzzes against Tommy's skin, frightened and panicked.

If Tommy can just get in there, extract some information on his code or *something*, he'll be able to count this mission as a success. But the longer he holds on without moving, the more the deviant's skin buzzes against his. With a deep breath, Tommy lets the skin of his hand fade away. It'll be fine. He's got the deviant.

And then suddenly, he doesn't.

The deviant surges forward, hand catching around the base of his throat like so many before him have. The rough choke has Tommy stepping back to avoid it, but there isn't that much room, and his back inevitably hits the counter. The sharp edge digs into his skin as the deviant shoves him further into it. Tommy scrambles, mind caught between bringing his hands *back* to brace himself or *up* to pry at the hand clenching around his throat.

In the end, his mind is too jumbled—already beginning to white out with his frantic, shallow breaths—to make a definitive decision, and he ends up doing both. One hand wraps around the deviant's wrist again while the other wedges between his back and the counter.

For a brief moment, he considers going ahead with his plan anyway. He has a hand on the deviant's skin, and it only takes a little bit of focus for him to delve into his memories. Tommy tightens his hand around his wrist; it would be so, so *easy*, and, at least then, he wouldn't be a failure. He could be *useful*.

The deviant lurches to the side before Tommy can come to any sort of meaningful conclusion. His hand fumbles around for something, and, when he comes back into sight, it's only long enough for him to catch the glint of silver before it sinks into the middle of his hand. Tommy yelps as it pierces his skin, and cracks through his chassis. Then, he sags in the deviant's hold.

His vision is a mess of warnings. Whatever is in his hand—and he can't even turn his head to look, not with the way the deviant's fingers press bruises into his jaw—is dragging against the

sensitive wires in his hand, making his fingers and arm twitch with the sensation. He can feel wet, cool thirium pooling around the hole in his hand, running down his skin and staining the kitchen countertop beneath him.

Probing fingers bring him back to the present. While the deviant still has one hand around his throat, the other is at his chest, poking prodding and ripping the buttons off his shirt. They must clatter to the ground with some kind of noise, but the thirium rushing through his ears is too loud. Pinpricks of pressure register in the skin around his thirium pump as nails scrabble at the organ. Then, they sink in, prying up his pump and taking a few chunks of skin with it.

The change is immediate. All the air leaves him in one explosive breath. His lungs practically collapse, and Tommy sags further against the counter as all the energy leaves with his thirium pump. His vision takes on a frantic red tint, and warnings make it impossible to see anything other than the deviant's face, contorted with desperation and a little bit of guilt.

In the corner of his vision, a countdown pops up, so helpfully informing him of his imminent shutdown and the, at most, three minutes he has to rectify the situation.

Tommy forces himself to focus. The deviant is looking predictably panicked, thirium staining his hands and the thirium pump. He throws it—which is literally the opposite of what Tommy needs right now; if he could, he would groan or curse or *something* but he can't even breathe right now. Tommy desperately tracks its delicate arch, and it lands somewhere in the midst of the tables and chairs.

In the time it takes to pull his eyes back to the deviant, he's already striding across the floor, hands wiping thirium away onto his pants. He glances over his shoulder one last time, expression pinched. He says something, and while Tommy still can't hear over the dull roar in his ears, he memorizes the motion of his lips. *I'm sorry.*

Well, at least he feels guilt for it. That *totally* makes the situation better.

His body is one massive point of tension. His hand throbs around the object lodged within it, his chest throbs with the absence of its most vital part, and there's a pounding pressure mounting behind his eyes. None of his injuries even attempt to heal, since the thirium within his body is trapped and stationary without a pump to distribute it.

Although he can barely blink—let alone *move*—Tommy forces himself into motion. His body is weighed down by exhaustion, and, if it weren't for the *thing* in his hand, he would've collapsed on the ground around. "Wilbur," he calls out desperately. The sound doesn't register in his own ears at all, but he doesn't know if that's because it's too low or if he can't *fucking hear*. "Wil, please."

He waits for a few seconds, reeling from the effort it took to only do that. But nobody shows up.

Tommy has to squeeze his eyes against the dizzying wave of hopelessness. The seconds count down until the end of his life. His vision flickers for a terrifying moment, but rights itself at the last second.

Fuck this. He is Cyberlife's best creation, and he doesn't ever give up, especially when shit is difficult. He didn't stop trying when Wilbur was an absolutely, certified asshole, and look at him now! He's a saint compared to what he once was, and that was all Tommy's work. He can do this.

Gritting his teeth against another wave of dizziness, he raises up his free hand. It's shaking and trembling with exertion, but he twists and turns until it wraps around the handle of the butter knife. A holt of electricity travels through his injured hand, and he's pretty sure—based on the buzzing in his throat—that he made some kind of wounded noise.

He tenses his jaw in preparation, tightens his hold around the metal handle, and then yanks it out in one tug. Immediately, more thirium gushes out of the wound—if he looks close enough, he can see his *wires* but he doesn't look other than that brief, nauseating second—and Tommy sinks to the ground. His legs feel like jelly, his hand keeps throbbing with every fresh gush of thirium, and he allows himself just a brief moment of sitting there with his head tilted back against the counter.

"Q," he pleads this time, on the off chance Quackity is still lingering by the door. "Big Q!"

Nothing. The kitchen remains devoid of any humans willing to help.

His uninjured hand gently wraps around his injured one in some sad attempt to staunch the blood flow, but it only sends another shock through his system, so he lets it be. Tommy pries his eyes open and, across the room, he catches sight of his thirium pump, lying innocently underneath the second table. His legs are still jelly, and his hands are shaking, and what little energy he has is slowly seeping out with his blood.

But if he doesn't move now, he'll never move again. He refuses to be destroyed here. He still has so much work left to do, lest his mission remains unaccomplished forever. And that deviant is going to get away unless he gets the *fuck up*.

Tommy lurches forward, stomach and bare chest slapping against the disgusting floor. He doesn't have nearly enough energy to stand up, so he resigns himself to crawling across the floor like some kind of bleeding slug. With a grunt he still can't hear, he drags himself across the floor, the toes of his shoes giving him most of the traction he needs to push forward. His bloody hand smears along the ground, short fingernails raking across the floor in a desperate bid to *live*.

Seconds tick down. He's down to a minute and thirty seconds.

His injured hand knocks into a chair, and Tommy cries out weakly. For a moment, he can do nothing other than lay on the ground, waves of electricity radiating from the wound. He holds perfectly still until the throbbing subsides to a manageable level, and then he continues on.

With a glance to his left, he catches sight of the other two androids. They're still standing there, arms pressed against their sides and blank eyes watching his desperate crawl without so much as a finger twitch to help.

These are perfectly obedient androids. They were told not to move, and so they don't. Nothing will move them other than a direct order from one of their registered handlers or some sort of over-right code. This is what Cyberlife wants.

The strange pressure behind his eyes grows, and he looks away from them with a scowl. By now, he's managed to make it underneath the first table. His thirium pump can't be more than ten feet away.

The seconds go down in time with the pounding of his wound. There's only a minute left.

Tommy keeps going because that's all he *can* do. He'll either make it to this thirium pump in time or die trying, and then there's nothing he can really do. His blood-slick hand slides against the floor, and his thirium-stained fingers try to gouge into the ground. Thirium tricks down his chest from the aching nail marks around the empty hole.

About five feet away from the thing, he stalls. His vision flickers again, but this time, it goes out completely. If he had enough energy to *breathe* right now, he's sure his chest would be heaving. "Wil," he cries out, desperate and panicked and silent against the buzzing in his ears, against the cold feeling of his lifeblood slowly leaking out of him. "Please, I need you."

It's a perverse reversal of before, he realizes. He's going to die, sprawled out across the floor in an aching, bloody mess, and Wilbur's going to find his body.

Tommy doesn't know how he'll react. Shock, most likely. Seeing anything that resembles a human dead on the ground must come as a shock. Tears, possibly. Any death might be enough to remind him of Fundy. And, if Tommy's not mistaken—although, bleeding out on the floor without his system to draw any conclusions—Wilbur could possibly care about him.

His hands tingle, and, with a panicked gasp, he realizes he's going numb. His fingers can no longer feel the floor so acutely beneath him, can no longer feel the temperature of the laminate.

Thirty seconds until shutdown.

Tommy presses his forehead against the floor. It's warmer than he is, somehow, and he soaks in the warmth. It reminds him of Wilbur.

He can't die here. He can't let Wilbur find his body. He can't *do* that to him.

With a newfound resolve giving a little more life to numb limbs, he leverages his feet against the ground and hauls himself forward. He strains, arm grasping around until his fingers brush against something plastic. With a weak grin, he closes blood-slick fingers around it and uses the last of his energy to roll over and shove the damn thing back in.

For a frightening second, nothing happens. And then, his vision explodes.

His chest heaves at an inhuman speed, eyes squeezed shut against the fluorescent lights that scorch his tired eyes, and his hand presses over his chest, keeping his thirium pump right

where it needs to be. He doesn't know how much time he spends on the ground, body still trembling with the shock in his system. Most of the dire warnings are gone when he pries open his eyes, except for one about his low thirium level.

Tommy allows himself one more moment of simply existing—he mostly focuses on the heat in his hand as the skin slowly regrows over his wound, trapping the thirium inside—and then, he hooks his fingers around the edge of the table and pulls.

His gut lurches ominously, but he ignores it. His thirium-slick palm pushes against the table, leaving a blue smear, and he sprints out of the kitchen. Faceless officers pass in a blur as Tommy weaves through the broadcasting room. When he gets to the main hallway, the first thing he sees is Wilbur with his head bent over the desktop at the security desk. Further down, he spots the deviant stuck at the door, an officer's hand on his chest.

"Don't let him go," he calls out, valiantly ignoring just how hoarse his voice is. All eyes swivel towards him, including Wilbur's, who glances up from the desk. He catches how Wilbur's eyes widen at the sight of him. "That android is a deviant!"

Tommy starts forward on shaky legs, and the guards on either side of the deviant both reach for their weapons. But, in the end, the deviant moves quicker than all of them.

He lurches forward with that same, inhuman speed—desperation can do wonders, it seems—and grabs the nearest officer's gun out of his hands. It's a semi-automatic weapon and, with a start, Tommy realizes he means to send a destructive wave of bullets across the entire hallway, effectively wiping out everyone in it.

Time slows until it's barely moving, and Tommy's system shoves options towards him. All of them are unnecessary, however. Tommy already knows his course of action because Wilbur is in that hallway.

Tommy doesn't stay stationary. He doesn't watch as the deviant's finger slowly wraps around the trigger, pushing down until he's ready to take out a dozen officers and one android. He lurches forward, hauling himself until he's in front of the security desk and *firmlly* in front of Wilbur. Then, he reaches over the desk, pulls Wilbur's gun out from his holster, and raises it.

With one shot fired—the noise of it echoing throughout the entire hallway—the deviant slumps onto the ground, thirium trickling down his cheeks from the bullet hole in his forehead.

For a moment, everything is still and silent. And then the hallway explodes with noise. Officers from the main room come running out, parting around an unmoving Tommy. Next to him, Wilbur hoists himself over the desk. "Holy shit," he breathes, hand resting on Tommy's tense shoulder. "You shot him."

That's pretty fucking obvious, he thinks but doesn't say. He can't move, not even to lower his gun arm or take his eyes off the crumpled pile that used to be a deviant. It was necessary, he uselessly tries to convince himself. That deviant would've killed an entire hallway full of people, including Wilbur. There was no way to bring him in alive.

Except, one of the options was to rush the deviant, wrestle the gun out of his hands, and subdue him without killing him. And Tommy didn't even let himself consider it for more than a nanosecond.

Suddenly, two warm hands are on his shoulders, turning him until his unmoving gaze lands on Wilbur's concerned face. He opens his mouth to assure him, to tell him it's okay because Tommy protected him, because Tommy will *always* protect him. But then those hands are cupping his face, and a rough, calloused thumb runs along his cheek. They come away blue.

"What happened, Toms?" he breathes, pulling back just enough to check the mess of blue that is his chest. One hand wanders away from his face, gently wrapping around his wrist to lift up his injured hand. "*Fuck*," he hisses, with feeling. "Are you okay?"

Is *he* okay? Wilbur's the one who almost got shot by a deviant. Why is he worried about *Tommy*?

"I'm fine," he says, although his voice cracks. Wilbur scowls, eyes narrowed at the obvious wound on his hand. "Are *you*?"

"Am I what?" Wilbur asks, distracted. His fingers gently probe around the wound, thumb massaging the raw skin around it. It throbs a little at the movement, but Tommy doesn't stop him. He blinks in realization. "*Okay*? Are you seriously asking me if *I'm* okay when you look like *this*?" His expression is just as incredulous as his tone. "Jesus, Tommy. Worry about yourself for once."

It feels vaguely hypocritical coming from him, but Tommy is suddenly feeling the full weight of his exhaustion. He sags into Wilbur's side, accepting the arm that wraps around his back to support him. "No need to worry 'bout me," he says, pushing his forehead into Wilbur's collarbone. This way, he can listen to the reassuring sound of his steady heartbeat. "'M fine."

Wilbur huffs, and it sounds like it got caught between fondness and exasperation. "Sure. Don't think we won't talk about this later," he warns. The threat is lost, though, when his gentle hand cards through Tommy's tangled hair. He scratches, once, at the base of his skull, and Tommy feels some of the everlasting tension leave his shoulders.

"Mkay," he hums.

Wilbur's breath brushes against his temple. It's hot and a little damp, but it feels nice compared to the soul-sucking coldness in his bones. "Shit. I'm gonna call George, okay? You need some medical attention."

That's a weird way to say it. Tommy hums again, eyes sliding shut at the gentle, soothing touch against his aching head. "You don't have his number."

Wilbur shrugs, and it jostles them both. "Yeah, but Phil does. I'll give him a call."

Drained of energy and a shit ton of thirium, the significance of that is lost on Tommy. His entire world is narrowed down to Wilbur's hand in his hair, his fingers circling his wrist, and the comforting thump of his heartbeat in his ears.

Chapter End Notes

Howdy! As of a few hours ago, I posted a poll on my twitter (here's the link to it: <https://twitter.com/NymphiiWrites/status/1532800363778252807>) with three of my eventually upcoming fics to see which one you guys would want next, so if you want some say in what I write next, go ahead a vote on that!

Here's more in-depth descriptor of the three of them than you'll find on twitter:

1. a fluffy band AU focused on Bench Trio and Sleepy Bois that bounces between a lot of different POV
2. a darkish Tommy-centric canon divergence with primary Allium Duo and secondary Bedrock Bros, and twisted but still present Disc Duo (it's a revenge fic)
3. a Wilbur-centric witch AU with primary Crimeboys and secondary Clingy Duo with a younger Tommy. This one will have a sequel that is more focused on Bedrock Bros, Bench Trio, Emerald Duo, and Phil and Tommy

Anyway, thank you guys so much for reading and commenting! I'm so honored that this fic has gotten 40K hits and just all the attention it's been getting has been blowing my mind, so thank you! I originally said that this fic would have 60ish chapters, but (considering the fact that my chapters are so long and I want to move on to some other projects) I'm thinking that number might lower to 40ish. Right now I'm trying to restructure my story to have it end a little earlier, but it should be just as good as my original plan (albeit with a little less time/attention payed to some other relationship development)

biological betrayal

Chapter Summary

Tommy recovers from his wounds, and Wilbur forgets about an anniversary.

Chapter Notes

TW: grief, mentions of suicidal ideation, discussions of child death

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Chapter Twenty-Four: Biological Betrayal

"Shit," George hisses under his breath once Tommy lets his skin retract. Wilbur is in a similar position, biting back a wince of sympathy.

There's a massive hole in the center of his hand ringed by jagged plastic, revealing wires stained with thirium and a small gap where they can see straight through to the other side. Some of the wires are severed or cut, embedded with shards of plastic, and they spark ominously in time with the circling of Tommy's red LED. All in all, it looks painful and, with thirium oozing out of it, a little gross.

George probes around the wound with quick, efficient fingers. "What happened?"

That's something that Wilbur desperately wants to know, as well. He had wasted no time calling Phil after everything got re-settled at the crime scene, and, when they eventually arrived home, it was to an unfamiliar car in the driveway and a familiar face loitering around the front door.

Although there was time to speak on the car ride over, Tommy seemed lost in his thoughts, fingers clenching and unclenching so much that Wilbur had eventually returned his coin. It seemed to soothe something in him, but, at that point, Wilbur was too uncertain to break their tentative silence. By the time he worked up the nerve, they were already pulling onto his street; by the time he found the words, he noticed their grumpy visitor.

Tommy's lips press together in a firm line. He's sitting on the kitchen counter to avoid getting thirium stains on the couch—George's idea, ultimately, after he shared the horrors of invisible

but textured stains—and his legs are swinging back and forth. Occasionally, they'll knock into the base of the counter with a hollow thud.

"Deviant stabbed a butter knife into my hand, pinning it against the counter," Tommy says eventually, reluctantly. His tone is barely louder than a mumble, and his eyes are glued to his hand, watching the wires spark faster the closer George gets to them. This time, Wilbur really does wince in sympathy.

"Great," George says in a short tone. He reaches over, perusing his options from his tool kit spread out across the counter. "That's fantastic. Not even a sharp weapon. A *dull one*." He makes some grumbling noises that are, admittedly, pretty funny, and chooses his weapons. He plucks a pair of skinny tweezers out from between its brethren and a tiny, circular mirror like at the dentist. "Just *great*."

Wilbur watches from his place on the other side of the counter, elbows knocking against the cool surface. George carefully but efficiently slots both of them into the crack in his hand. With the tweezers, he picks out the tiny shards of plastic still embedded before laying them on a paper towel he made Wilbur retrieve for him. Then, he quickly reconnects the severed wires before wrapping them in electrical tape.

Slowly, he lets his gaze slide from George's frown and his muttered words to Tommy's face. It's relatively devoid of any telling expressions, but his body is tense with the effort to stay still. Every time George moves, a subtle jolt goes through his entire body, and Tommy flinches. It's barely more than a blink, but, by this point, Wilbur is well acquainted with his mannerisms.

That's one thing they forgot to add to their little deviant traits list. The appearance of pain.

"Jesus, Tommy," Wilbur says in a low voice, mostly distracting himself—and Tommy—from where his thoughts had been headed. He leans forward, and the edge of the counter digs into his lower gut. "What about this?" He gestures to Tommy's chest, which is still exposed thanks to his missing buttons.

It's looking less like a horror show, now. Most of the blue has faded—to his eyes, at least—and the bag of thirium George had shoved in his hand when they first arrived has already done its work. The missing chunks of skin around his thirium pump are back and looking perfectly untouched, but the image is still ingrained in his brain.

Tommy does not look pleased in the slightest, and Wilbur has to press his lips together to keep from smiling. He supposes that's fair, especially since Wilbur also hates talking about his injuries. It's the by-product of living with two chronic worrywarts who made a much bigger deal out of his injuries, especially when he was a clumsy, lanky teen still figuring out how to fit in his own skin.

But Tommy's obviously been trying to implement some sort of communication between them, if the way he looks expectantly to Wilbur whenever he looks even mildly upset is any indication. He figures it's a fucking two-way street, and that Tommy can just deal with it.

Tommy's mouth moves incriminatingly, but his words are nothing but a dull whisper.

"I'm sorry," Wilbur says, because no amount of love and affection will ever be able to tone down the asshole genes in his DNA. "What was that?"

Tommy glares, but it's half-hearted at best. He knows when he's been bested. Instead, he raises his chin until he meets Wilbur's eyes, and says, loudly, "A deviant pulled my fucking thirium pump out."

"What?" George demands, head snapping up, at the same time Wilbur breathes, "Holy *shit*, Tommy."

Despite the explanation, Wilbur is left more confused than before. Why the fuck would Tommy be asking if he was okay when nothing even happened? When he might've gotten shot but didn't, thanks to Tommy's quick thinking? Why did he ignore the fact that his thirium pump—his *heart*—had been ripped out of his chest?

"What the fuck, man? Why didn't you tell me?"

Tommy looks away then, shoulders hunched. "Wasn't important," he mumbles.

Wasn't important? *Wasn't important?* They were going to have a very long and serious conversation once George was finally gone.

As if sensing his growing ire, Tommy clenches his teeth. "I got it back, didn't I?" he demands. "I'm fine now. All systems functioning optimally, once we get this patched up." He flexes his fingers. A gush of thirium seeps out of the wound, and George scolds him with a gentle slap on his wrist. He stops moving.

George still has a firm frown on his face, but he's back to focusing on his work. With a second, separate paper towel, he mops up the pooling thirium and re-cleans the wounds. "How long was it out?"

There's a moment of silence. Wilbur glances up to see Tommy pressing his lips together. Eventually, he says, "Two minutes and thirty seconds."

"Two minutes and—" His head snaps up, alarm stretched across his face. "Tommy! You need to be more careful. You're our only defense against deviancy, you know that. You can't be doing that."

Somehow, Tommy only curls further into himself. "Well it wasn't exactly planned!" he protests with a scowl. "I went into the kitchen to interrogate three androids since I knew one of them was a deviant. And, when I discovered which one, I wanted to take a look at his code."

George scowls. "You should've focused on bringing him in functioning. Then *I* could've looked at the code." He huffs an angry breath, setting down his tools much firmer than necessary. "You risked a vulnerable position, and it didn't pay off." He angrily turns Tommy's hand this way and that way, and Wilbur frowns at Tommy's flinch. "Did you get the code?"

"No."

"Of course you didn't. Interfacing with deviants." George shakes his head with a scoff. He turns back to his tool kit, pulling out two small squares of plastic. Wilbur watches as he places one over the hole in his palm and then pulls out a glorified hair dryer. He unplugs the toaster to free up the outlet, and then starts it up.

Under the heat, the plastic starts to melt. It's a slow, target process, and while it looks like unappetizing goop, it still holds its shape. Keeping the dryer on, George leans over, grabbing a metal scraper from the box. He scrapes at the goop until it better fills in the hole. Then, when it's entirely filled in, he switches from the hair dryer to some device that resembles the tool dentists use to harden cavity fillings.

He places it so that it covers the entire wet plastic and starts it up. It beeps a few times, and, when he removes it, the wound is completely gone. The only reminder of it is a faint scar—for lack of a better word—separating the new plastic from the old. Flipping Tommy's hand around, he repeats the process until his hand is as good as new.

"All good," George says, patting Tommy's wrist. Slowly, the skin retreats back to its proper position. It's almost like it never even happened. "Now take better care of yourself. Stop doing reckless things just because. Actually think next time, okay?"

Looking properly like some scolded kid, Tommy mumbles his assent. Without thinking about it, Wilbur leans over, rubbing his hand against Tommy's head and mussing up his already messy curls further. "Why don't you go wash the thirium off?" he offers. Despite the little evidence of it, Wilbur knows Tommy can still see it. Washing it all off will make him feel better. "I'll show George out."

And then they're going to watch Up as many times as they need to or until they crash on the couch like usual. But George doesn't need to know that.

"Okay." Tommy hops off the counter, poking at the new portions of his hand, even with a layer of skin hiding it. "Bye George." Then, with a small wave, he disappears into the bathroom.

"Hey, I'm leaving a few bags of thirium here for later, okay?" George calls after him, already fishing out four bags out of his tool kit. He makes eye contact with Wilbur and then, with a pointed look, he sets them down on the counter in between them.

Wilbur jerks his head towards the door and then leads the way. However, after George slips out and onto the front porch, Wilbur joins him and shuts the door behind him. At George's confused look, he says, "I just wanted to apologize for how I acted when we first met." He's laying it a little sugary and thick, but the apology comes from a place of genuine guilt. "It was completely inappropriate. Not to mention unprofessional. I was hoping we could just start over, since we're going to be working together for the foreseeable future."

George raises a brow. "It's fine. I mean, it seems like you really hate androids. I can imagine it was difficult finding out you had to work with one."

Wilbur glances towards the closed front door. His time, before Tommy finishes cleaning up and comes looking for him, is limited. "I did," he says shortly, smiling at the last second so it

doesn't come off as aggressive. "But, uh, you know. I came around eventually. He's not so bad." He turns back to George. "I actually wanted to talk to you about deviancy. Or, well, Tommy and deviancy." At George's confused look, he hurries to continue. "I know he's a special prototype and all that shit, but I wanted to know how you can be so sure Tommy won't go deviant?"

George's expression turns sharp. "Has he been exhibiting deviant behavior?"

"What? No!" The lie slips easily past his lips. Wilbur shakes his head and schools his expression into something neutral but irritated at the suggestion. "No. But I can't imagine you would allow him to investigate without something up your sleeve. And I want to make sure I don't have to worry about him becoming a deviant."

George readjusts the bag strap on his shoulder. The tools inside clink against each other. "Well, he's got a number of different deviancy-deterrent programs. His software was specially built to stabilize during events or actions that may increase deviant-like tendencies."

Wilbur sorts through the information in his brain, decoding the nerd-talk into more understandable language. When he does, his brow furrows. "Wait, how much did you know about deviancy before Tommy?"

"Not a lot." George shrugs. It disrupts his bag again. "We knew it was a problem, and we knew that certain behaviors and actions could cause an android's system to become unstable." His glasses slide down the bridge of his nose, and he hastily pushes them up. "We modeled Tommy's system off the most advanced, adaptive program of the time, and then we added some self-correcting code, of sorts. Whenever he encounters something that might stabilize his system, his code rewrites itself." He explains with expressive hand gestures. "That process is facilitated by an internal handler."

"Internal handler?"

George nods. His entire demeanor is changed, face lighting up. "Yeah! You've probably seen him when he makes reports?" Wilbur nods. "Yeah, he's coded with an AI called DREAM. It's meant to act not only as another deterrent by providing a physical face Tommy needs to report to, but it also facilitates the code-rewriting process. From inside his own system, DREAM monitors Tommy's behavior and corrects it as needed."

That is eleven levels of fucked up. Wilbur's mouth dries up just hearing about it. "Oh."

George continues on, oblivious to the way he shoves his hands into his pockets to hide their trembling. "Yeah, so you don't have to worry. Besides, I check to see how stable his code is whenever I see him." He gestures ambiguously. "Just as an extra precaution. If it becomes too unstable, I'll let you know and we can extract him. We still don't know exactly *how* to stop deviancy, but this is our best method until you two find something substantial."

The unspoken words—*so get to work and find something quick*—hang in the air between them. And, with another curt nod, George follows the gravel path back to his driveway.

Wilbur stands out on the porch for far too long—way past when George's car turned off his street—and he only comes back inside when an inquisitive and wet-haired Tommy pokes his head out.

Wilbur is, first and foremost, a detective.

He's been a detective for years now, and that shit sticks in the brain, pollutes his veins. He can't stop it any more than he can still the air in his lungs by sheer force alone. It's impossible to stop years and years of ingrained habits and instincts just because the work clock ran out.

So, ever since he's familiarized himself with the thought of Tommy, possibly, being a deviant, his detective instincts have kicked in. And now he's started looking for evidence—the most important aspect in any investigation—because right now all he has are some funny feelings, a laugh that sounds too human, and the vague notion that Tommy *might* care about him.

Oh, and the persistent, low-grade fear boiling in his gut because he had made a big, *big* mistake pushing Tommy against the wall that day.

Which, like, *yeah*. He already knew that. The overwhelming guilt clouding his mind directly after his limp hand fell away from his neck and during his early morning scrub-fest—to cleanse the walls of a stain he couldn't even *see*—were pretty big indicators.

But this is less in the realm of 'oh god I'm a terrible person, when did I become this unrecognizable monster' and more 'oh god the consequences of my admittedly shitty actions have finally caught up and almost certain death is coming for me.'

Which, again, yes, that is something that Wilbur is passively (or actively, on a particularly shitty day) seeking out, but hey! He wanted it to be on his terms and his terms alone, goddammit. So whether that means drinking himself into an early grave via a wrinkly, shrunken liver or a gun pressed against his temple, it was his choice.

Plus, there is the horrifying visual of Tommy—the one person that had actually stuck around, the only person that had actually cared about him and given a fuck about his well-being—choking the life out of him, just as he had once done.

Which, choking is, like, one of the worst ways to die, and if Wilbur's being honest, he really doesn't want Tommy to kill him. That would only give him another fucked-up, traumatic event to shove under the rug and drink away until he forgot. He does not need another of those, *thank you very much*.

But, uh, evidence collection.

His mind is kind of reeling today, although it hasn't even been that long since he sleepily rubbed the crust from his eyes and greeted the sun with a very solid, two-handed 'FUCK

YOU'. He's jittery in a way he isn't normally, almost like he's waiting for the other ball to drop and for this surprisingly okay day to be absolutely ruined.

Groaning low in the back of his throat, Wilbur wiggles and writhes and shoves until he's sitting up, sore back resting against his chipped headboard. *Right*. Evidence collection.

All in all, what meager things he has so far are not a lot. Not enough to win him a warrant and *definitely* not enough to go slinging around accusations. But, despite the day between the Stratford tower incident and today, he has not made any efforts to monitor Tommy's behavior. Any time he tries, he immediately gets distracted by something (usually by Tommy.)

Wilbur leans over, fiddling with the drawer in his bedside table until it slides out with a screech. If he's going to collect evidence, then he needs to actually record his thoughts. And since Tommy and he had already put together a nifty little list about all the deviant behaviors they have come across, Wilbur figures he can use it as a launching pad for his own list.

Holding the memory of their list in the forefront of his mind, Wilbur tears a piece of paper from one of the many, half-filled journals forgotten in the drawer. He grabs a pen with teeth marks on the end from the same drawer and then hastily scribbles down what he remembers in his lovely chicken scratch. When he's recreated it to the best of his ability, he sits back and considers each one in relation to Tommy.

A focus and concern around identity.

As far as Wilbur can remember—his memory is, admittedly, *shit*—this isn't really the case.

Rupert had painstakingly stitched his name into his jacket, Niki coveted her name like it was something special, Stella resented that she shared a face with someone else. All of them attached meaning to their names, meaning to their identities outside of just being an android.

But Tommy never seemed to, at least outwardly or in any moment Wilbur had seen. He didn't mind wearing his uniform, he didn't mind the LED circling at his temple, and he didn't mind all the markers plastered across his clothes, designating him as an android for the world to see. He proudly declared himself an android whenever he introduced himself, and he never corrected people when he was reduced to nothing but a piece of plastic.

He just... didn't mind.

Wilbur draws a shaky X next to that trait and then moves down the list.

Use of 'feeling words'.

Although Wilbur can't remember every conversation they've ever had or every word that Tommy's spoken, he knows that Tommy doesn't use 'feeling words' often. An android using language like that is noticeable, attention-grabbing, and Wilbur usually notices when he does. It's usually when Wilbur is being emotional and Tommy is trying to either get on his good side or calm him down. And while he hardly ever uses feeling words, he does often claim that things are 'annoying' or 'unfair' or 'fucked-up'.

Which leaves Wilbur hesitating with uncertainty, hand hovering over the space next to this trait. An X or a checkmark, an X or a checkmark? Which one? In the end, lips pressed together into a thin line, he draws a question mark. Then, after another moment of hesitation, he writes the words 'need more evidence' next to it and moves on.

Emotional shock.

Now this one was also more complicated than a simple yes or no. While Wilbur *had* hurt him more times than he could count, with the light strangulation being the final straw, he wasn't sure if it counted as an emotional shock. By Wilbur's—and any other human's—it sure would, but Tommy was different, and the question itself is a bit subjective.

What did an android consider emotional shock?

For Niki, it had been abuse. For Blue, it had been the sight of another being killed. For Stella, it was an overwhelming myriad of shitty things, compiling and adding up until she had no choice but to lash out. And, while they couldn't be certain, for Ranboo, it was highly likely that his kid was being hurt.

Taking into consideration all of these reasons, Wilbur still draws a blank. Tommy had seen his fair share of others being hurt. He'd seen androids die, felt the life drain out of them, he'd grappled with them and hunted them down muddy alleyways. And now that he's thinking about it, Tommy's numb silence after Stella's death has a whole new meaning.

How stupid is he? How did he miss such obvious displays of deviancy, especially when they were right in front of his face? How many androids verbally and mentally shut down after feeling the death of another?

Reaching over for the still-open drawer, Wilbur tears off another sheet of paper. On this one, he jots down a few of his notes and questions and evidence to dig into later. Then, he marks the trait with a question mark, if only because the term emotional shock is so muddled and confusing and so *subjective*.

The appearance of emotions.

Without doubt or hesitation, Wilbur draws a check next to it.

He couldn't count on two hands the amount of emotions he's seen flitting across Tommy's face. Budding joy—complete with a human smile that met his eyes and a laugh that simply *couldn't* be programmed—icy fear, broiling anger, desperate, panicked reassurance. Hell, the number of emotions that crossed his expression during Niki's interrogation *alone* couldn't be counted on his two hands.

Even excluding all of this and *more*, the image of Tommy at the crime scene, standing in front of the nameless officer and absorbing those sugary sweet compliments, is forever burned into his brain. Wilbur didn't know that androids were capable of blushing, let alone that they blushed *blue*. But there it was, staring him right in the face, blue slowly spreading across the tips of his ears and beginning to color his cheeks.

God, they're lucky that Quackity had intervened, lest anyone else stumble onto that little fact.

And sure, maybe Wilbur's an idiot for having missed something in front of his face for so long. Tommy certainly wasn't subtle in that regard. But he had always been a little *rawer* than the other androids.

From the first week or so with him, Tommy was already spitting at Wilbur, teeth clenched and hands twitching as Wilbur continued to ignore his advice, his guidance, his expertise. He had always been just a little different. Too quick to change the expression on his face if he thought it could get him what he needed.

Wilbur had simply chalked it up to him being an advanced prototype capable of adapting and with a social program more expansive than any other. And maybe that is part of it—a system so advanced it can't help but mimic humanity—but he feels like it isn't the whole story. He doesn't remember when Tommy slipped past 'advanced mimicry' and right into 'human'. Maybe it was after Wilbur's outburst, when he curled in on himself in the car, face crumpled with something unidentifiable.

So maybe that incident *was* the emotional shock that contributed to his deviant tendencies.

Wilbur scribbles down these thoughts and more on that second sheet of paper before turning to the next item on the list.

Signs of enjoyment.

All it took is one gentle, probing thought and a million images spring forward. Tommy on his stomach, sprawled across Wilbur's gritty carpet. One hand props his chin up, eyes closed and gentle relaxation playing across his face as music fills a once desolate home.

Tommy wedged in the corner of the couch, spindly arms wrapped around his freakishly long legs. His chin is propped on his knees this time, eyes wide and locked on the TV as it plays Up for the millionth time. His lips, which are curled into a soft smile, are hidden against his borrowed sweatpants.

Tommy doubled over with laughter, Quackity's arm thrown over his shoulders as he gestures wildly to whatever tall tale—an obvious lie—he's spinning. His eyes are crinkled so hard they're completely shut, and his smile exposes his unnaturally straight teeth.

Yep. Got that covered.

Wilbur checks it off with ease, a steady hand, and a flick of his wrist.

Affinity for animals.

This one is, yet again, a no-brainer. It has been a no-brainer since Wilbur had dragged some responsibility on himself for once, hands forming tight claws around an overloaded trash bag and feet carrying him, automatically, to his garbage can sitting on the curb. It was there, illuminated with the moon and the distant house lights, that he saw it; Tommy sitting on the

edge of his driveway, hands held out to at least a dozen raccoons and a few, bedraggled possums.

Wilbur had stared, and Tommy, startled by the noise of the front door slamming shut, had looked up sharply. All he could do in response, despite Tommy's sheepish look, was say, "So *this* is why the neighborhood has been complaining about increased vermin."

And, despite Tommy's scolding insistence following him—"They're not *vermin*, Wil! They're my friends."—Wilbur had wandered back into the house, trash staying in the spot he had dropped it. It didn't matter, anyway; he trusted Tommy to get it to its proper place before he came back inside.

So yeah. Wilbur still routinely spots raccoons in the early morning, poking around his yard with their grubby little hands. They usually pop their little heads up when he swings the front door open, generally looking delighted until they realized there was no LED circling at his temple.

A giant mark for that one, and Wilbur moves on without scribbling down any notes.

Care for other living/sentient beings.

Tommy is affectionate, for an android, and it isn't hard to tell when he likes something. Quackity, for example, was one of the first few things—people—that Tommy had really latched onto. It only took a few smiles, a few jokes, Q's concept of personal space—which was nonexistent—and Q's aggressive defense of Tommy, and the rest is history.

Wilbur would also classify his obvious care for androids under this category. Although he had been able to dismiss it as a friendly façade to gain information at first, he's now looking through a much more critical lens. Now, it's rather obvious that Tommy cares for the androids they come across. Niki, Stella, the nameless, dead android girls. There were no other words for the way he treated them other than care and concern.

And then there was Wilbur himself.

He doesn't want to toot his own horn or let his ego grow far too big for his scrawny little neck, but he could possibly argue that Tommy cares about him.

Wilbur startles when there's a thump at his bedroom door. Without even consciously thinking about it, he folds up his list and his expanded evidence into two, uneven squares and shoves them in his sweatpants pockets. When he glances up, the door is open, and Tommy is striding across the room, face crumpled and Wilbur's phone clenched tightly in his hand.

"It's Phil," he says in a brief explanation, handing over the phone. Wilbur reaches up to take it, and their hands brush together. His eyes catch on the way Tommy's skin retracts, automatically, where they're touching.

Then, without waiting for Wilbur to fully accept whatever responsibility he's just thrust upon him, Tommy sprawls out on the bed beside him. The little bastard doesn't even pretend he's not listening. Wilbur huffs softly—fondly—and holds the phone up to his ear. "Ayup?"

"Wil," Phil breathes, sounding a little annoyed but mostly relieved to hear his voice. He frowns and brings his legs up until they sit, flushed, against his chest. "There you are."

Wilbur steals a look at Tommy, whose entire expression is pinched. He nudges him with his foot until he reluctantly relaxes. "Yep. Here I am. What did you need?"

The conversation to get him to call George hasn't been... unpleasant, exactly, but it *had* been awkward. There wasn't much for them to talk about, in the end—how is he supposed to choose between bringing up their crumbling relationship and dodging the fact that they don't spend time together outside of work hours—other than the initial request and confirmation for George's help.

Wilbur had expected him to hang up as soon as he agreed, but then he *lingered* for a moment, silence tense with unsaid words. Which is fair, since this is the first time that Wilbur has initiated a call in too long, but hey! Tommy literally had a hole in his hand. There wasn't a ton of time to sit around and shoot the breeze.

"I just wanted to check in," he says. He's speaking in that too-gentle tone, like he sees Wilbur as nothing more than cracked glass and fragile obsidian. Like, if he holds just a little shy of too hard or pushes just a little too much, he'll shatter into a million pieces. It makes Wilbur reel, like he's missing a piece of vital information. "You know, to make sure you're doing alright. And to let you know that I'm here if you need me."

When was the last time Phil made that offer? Was it after the funeral, when Wilbur was still in the 'denial' stage of his grief before losing himself to anger? Or was it later, when he was too drunk to even remember? Either way, it had been a while since his father had tired of being rejected, spat on, cursed at, and ignored by a boy who used to look at him like he gave the birds their wings.

It's almost nice to hear, if it wasn't so unexpected and sudden.

"I'm good," he says, awkward and stilted. He exchanges another look with Tommy, who merely shrugs. He's laying down on his stomach at this point, and his entire side is pressed against Wilbur's leg. For a moment, his blood chills with the fear that Tommy will be able to feel the shape of the two folded slips in his pocket and somehow just *know*.

It's as irrational as it is unlikely, but the thought gets stuck to the walls of his brain before he can shake it loose.

"Why? What's going on?"

There's a long pause, and Wilbur frowns. "Wil," Phil says, suddenly sounding much more concerned. "Did you forget what day it is?"

"What day it is?" he repeats helplessly. "It's November—" he cuts off sharply with a sharp intake of breath. "*Shit.*"

It's November 16th. Because the day before was the 15th and the day after, when Tommy had raced down that hall like a bat out of hell to save an entire hallway's worth of people, had

been the 14th. Which makes today the 16th.

Wilbur fumbles with his phone and accidentally drops it in his lap in his haste. He needs to check. He needs to be sure that it's actually the 16th and not some dumb, shitty time loop, or something. His fingers shake and his breath is coming too fast in his chest and he can hear Phil's faint, tinny voice and he gets the date and—

November 16th.

He forgot.

Phil's voice grows louder and more frantic with every second of silence, but it takes a long time before he can gather shattered pieces of himself together again. "I'll call you back," he says, in a dull monotone. It only makes Phil call his name louder—because they both know he won't call back, not today—but Wilbur is already turning his phone off, and letting his limp hand settle in his lap.

How could he forget? How could he fucking *do* that?

He's already a fuck-up with a dead son and a wife who left long before the divorce papers arrived in the mail. How could he add 'terrible, shitty father who forgets the worst day of his life to his thrilling resume?

Tommy next to him is still, wide eyes turned attentively towards him. He can tell when he caves and does a quick search by his own sharp intake of breath. "Oh, Wilbur."

And there's the other ball. The okay-day ruining revelation. Because Wilbur forgot today was the day his son died.

Wilbur throws himself out of bed, tossing his blanket so hard it covers Tommy. He ignores the muffled sounds of his confusion and indignation, throwing himself through the door and into the bathroom. His legs feel like jelly, weak and unstable, and he feels a little sick.

Because how could he forget?

Sure, he's been pretty distracted by the latest case and by Tommy's injury, but seriously? He always, always remembered and not just because it was a fun and quirky anniversary to celebrate. It was because the sick feeling in his gut and the tightness around his heart always increased in the weeks leading up to this day. It's because whatever semblance of normality he managed to build up always crumbled to the ground around him. It was because today, three years ago, his son had died on an operating table in the middle of the night, and *he forgot*.

How could his body betray him like this? He woke up today and he felt *fine*. No tremors in his hands, no bile crowding his throat, no solace needed in his own arms, curled up in bed to hide away. How could he even be slightly okay on the worst day of his life? This was a terrible, miserable day, and it was a betrayal to his son's memory to even have those brief moments of 'okay'.

Gripping white porcelain with trembling fingers, Wilbur prepares for the sickness that inevitably will come.

It never does, despite the cold sweat beading on his brow and sliding down between his shoulder blades. It feels like another slap in the face, another biological betrayal. His body is... fine.

Not violently ill with the remnants of a truly heinous hangover—he hasn't even drunk anything in the past five days, a new personal record—or sick from the horrible memories that still flash behind his eyes. Sterile white walls, blood seeping beneath his jagged fingernails, the hard plastic chair underneath him. Sally's warm hand gripping his own until her nails dug into his skin.

When he's sure nothing will come up, and when guilty tears finally dry up, Wilbur hauls himself up using the bathroom sink. He spits, once, into it to rinse the taste lingering in his mouth and then grabs his toothbrush. When he looks up, toothbrush held in his mouth, his own reflection greets him.

He doesn't look bad, all things considered. There's a slight puffed redness ringing his eyes, but his persistent bags are faded and there's color in his cheeks. It's just one more thing that sends a pang of guilt through him, but he ignores it to the best of his ability. He tries to ignore the mirror altogether, but his eyes catch on a pink post-it note stuck to its reflective surface.

With narrowed eyes, he leans forward. It's a name—Puffy—and a phone number written underneath it in Tommy's neat handwriting. Wilbur immediately shoves it to the back of his mind, spitting out the toothpaste foaming in his mouth and leaning down to rise it out. Despite the minty freshness, his mouth tastes like it's rotting. Wilbur doesn't think that's going away until he has a bottle in his hand and the burn of alcohol on his tongue.

(A tiny part of him—that sounds like Tommy—cries that he doesn't *need* alcohol. He's going five days strong, why not make it six? He ignores it, of course.)

Swinging the door open, he brushes past Tommy, whose brow is furrowed in concern, and heads into the kitchen. There should be more than enough beer in the fridge to get a steady buzz going on, and, by that time, he can head elsewhere for something stronger. Tommy follows behind him, a silent and concerned presence.

His hand wraps around the cool handle of the fridge, but he stops before opening it, brow furrowed.

There are more pink post-it notes littering the front of the fridge. Two of them—one on the fridge part and one on the freezer—are the same as in the bathroom. The name, Puffy, followed by the same phone number. The rest of them are in a loose circle around the two center notes, with various arrows pointing to them and notes like '*Call her!*' and '*Look at this! How could a phone number be scary?*'

Wilbur plucks one of the notes from the fridge. The pounding of his heart and the shaking in his limbs subsides a little bit. He holds up the note, stuck to his pointer finger. "What the fuck is this?"

Tommy tries for a smile. He misses abysmally. "It's uh... the number for this really cool therapist I found?" Wilbur groans, crumbling the note up in his fist. Tommy frowns. "Hey, she seems really cool. Her name is Puffy, and she's an ex-naval Captain. She's got all this shit on her website about her own struggle with PTSD and how she wants to help others the way that she's been helped." Tommy crosses the distance between them, uncrumpling the note and smoothing it out against the counter. "I think she would be a really good fit for you."

"I'm not going to therapy," he says, but despite the available fridge next to him, he doesn't go for it. Now, with Tommy's insistent gaze searching his face, the thought of alcohol curdles his stomach. "I told you. I manage okay."

Tommy shoots him the most unimpressed look ever, eyes darting between him and the fridge he was so desperately going for a moment earlier. "Okay isn't good, Wil. You deserve to be better than okay."

Warmth blossoms in his chest. "Okay is all most people ever get," he says, and then, just to be a brat, he adds, "I'm not calling."

Tommy presses his lips together into a long, firm line. "Alright, alright," he says, but Wilbur doesn't buy his little *surrender* for one second. "The number is there if you need it." He presses the post-it note back onto the fridge, and it miraculously sticks. "But I think it would be a really good idea to call. Just *talk* to her."

Thankfully, Tommy leaves it at that.

However, the silence creeps back in with the *tick tick tick* of the clock above them, and the thoughts slowly roll back in. He clenches and unclenches his hands, nails leaving small crescents in his palms. He understands Tommy's need for his coin now. His fingers itch to do anything, and he settles for fiddling with the hem of his shirt.

"What?"

Wilbur glances up. Tommy is watching him attentively, eyes tracking the motion of his restless hands. He looks so earnest, so genuinely worried about Wilbur and his dumb, itchy blood.

And it's only going to get worse.

The pressure will build and build into his chest until he does something stupid and harmful, like shove Tommy up against another wall, hand at his throat. It's happened time and time again, with every inch Phil and Techno tried to push. But he doesn't want it to keep happening. He doesn't want to lash out anymore. He's been doing so *good* lately, even if his chest aches sometimes and he still has days where he curls up in his bed and doesn't get up until his bladder fills.

He's tired of being angry, even if the only alternative is vulnerability.

Squeezing his eyes shut against the heat that wells there, Wilbur takes a deep breath. "I'm a shitty father. How could I forget? It's the worst day of my fucking life, and—and I should be

completely debilitated right now. But I'm not." His hands are shaking again. He crosses his arms over his chest and shoves his hands into the crook of his elbows. "And that's so fucking unfair. How could I possibly be okay with out him?"

"That's not— Wil, you can't expect to be miserable forever. It's a part of healing." Tommy gets in his space, a cool hand on his shoulder. It bleeds through the thin layer of his cotton shirt. "And it's a good thing, even if it doesn't feel like it right now." Maybe it is. Maybe Tommy's right, and this is all a part of his five-step plan to ruin his own life so he can collapse into an early grave.

Tommy's hand moves up until it's cupping his flush cheek. "Don't be mad at yourself because you got to live and he didn't," he says, with the solemnity of someone tossing the final shovel of dirt on a fresh grave.

Oh.

Tommy continues on as if he didn't just shift Wilbur's entire world view an inch to the left. Almost everything is the same, but he feels irreparably different.

"Here's what we're going to do," he says, drawing his hand away from Wilbur's face. "I'm gonna let Phil know that we aren't coming in today—a formality, really, I'm sure he understands—and we're going to go hang out wherever he's buried, okay?" Wilbur stares and stares, and Tommy smiles, softly. "You can't be a shitty father if you spend the whole day with him."

Wilbur runs through the scenario in his head, but he can't find anything wrong with it. "Okay," he agrees.

Tommy's smile widens. "Okay?"

"Yeah." Wilbur snuffles, dragging his sleeve across his dry face. "That sounds nice."

Fundy is buried in a relatively nice location, a gated cemetery with willow trees scattered throughout the property. It's not too far from that park where Wilbur used to take him.

During the murky days in the midst of his grief, Wilbur wasn't in any position to make important decisions, like where his son was going to be buried or what child-sized coffin would cocoon his corpse. No, that was all Phil, and while he would abandon Wilbur in later days, both he and Techno stuck close in the first few months of being a childless father.

It's still a nice place, even after a few years. There's a thin layer of frost decorating the surrounding graves and coating the grass. It crunched underfoot as they approached, but the patch of grass underneath Wilbur has melted by now. Tommy had the forethought to bring a blanket and that's the sole thing protecting Wilbur's ass from most of the moisture. It's still bitingly cold, and Wilbur tucks his hands against his sternum.

The graveyard is empty and silent, besides the sound of his ragged breath fogging in the air. Wilbur doesn't have much to say, anyway.

For some people, talking to graves and to the bones underneath was cathartic, and maybe it was. Wilbur certainly used to visit this place a lot in the earlier days. In the year he lost to grief and anger.

He remembers talking a lot when he was here, although he doesn't quite remember the words. Anger certainly had been at the forefront of his thoughts. Anger at himself, at the world, at androids, of all things. Something had to be there to absorb the brunt of his righteous rage, he supposes, and androids made a convenient scapegoat.

Wilbur shifts until his leg moves out from under him.

Maybe people talk to graves to fill the overwhelming silence. He never bought into the whole 'telling lost loved ones what they've missed' because he didn't believe in any sort of afterlife. His boy was a pile of decomposed bones in a fancy coffin built for people taken far too early. His spirit wasn't lingering, and if it was, he sure has better things to do than follow his deadbeat, alcoholic father around and watch as he drowns in his own sorrow.

"Why Hyacinth?"

Wilbur blinks. For a moment, he forgot that he wasn't alone. But there Tommy is, sitting on the corner of the blanket, legs crossed, hands in his lap, and eyes burning Fundy's ridiculously ornate grave with the intensity of his stare.

"Huh?" he asks, eloquently.

Tommy turns to face him, blinking slowly as biting wind whips through them. "Why did you pick Hyacinth?"

"Oh." Wilbur turns to look at the gentle bundle of flowers. Strewn along the bottom of his grave, the purple Hyacinth Wilbur bought on the drive over lays innocently. Its stalks are small, and the buds on the stem are barely even blooming.

When they were kids and had finally settled into life in a stable home, Techno had a brief obsession with Victorian flower language. It wasn't his oddest interest—not then and not nearly by now—but it was one of his most consuming ones. He spent hours upon hours researching and peppering Wilbur with facts.

Techno always claimed it was because certain bouquets could be used to send secret messages—"Revolution messages, Wilbur. For when we overthrow the government."—and that it was ultimately a useful skill to have.

He wasn't fooling anyone, though. It was painfully clear to both Wilbur and Phil that he just really liked flowers.

"It, uh—" he laughs a little bit, and it hurts in his chest. It feels a bit silly, now that he really thinks about it. It's weird how even when people don't stick around, parts of them embed

themselves in your soul. He reaches out, fingers tracing the delicate petals. "It represents sorrow." The cold stings his hands and, with another harsh breeze, he's forced to retreat back into the safety of his coat. "Techno taught me all about that shit."

It's silent for a long time, and, when Wilbur braves a look at Tommy, his face is crumpled with something indecipherable. When he catches Wilbur looking, he smiles, despite how his eyes hold onto something melancholic.

"What is it?"

"I think—" Tommy turns back to the grave and, with shaking fingers, he traces the gentle script of Fundy's name. "—you should reinstate those Sunday dinners."

Wilbur reels back in shock. "*What?*"

Tommy bites his lip. "You really miss your family, Wil." He doesn't know what his face does, but it must have been something, because Tommy rushes to continue. "And I'm not—I'm not saying you should just *forgive* them or forget what they've done to hurt you but—" their eyes meet, then, and the breath is punched out of his lungs. "You've hurt them too. And I think, if Phil's call is any indication, that they still care about you."

Wilbur turns back to Fundy's grave. It really is ridiculously ornate. Grape vines are carved along the edges, interspersed with a delicate but simple sun design. On the front of the grave, at the very top, there's a realistic statue of a fox's head, teeth bared to protect the precious bones that lie beneath it.

Phil had done that. Despite the fact that he was in mourning too, Phil had commissioned a headstone that not only would Fundy have *loved*, but it also served as a warm reminder of a boy gone far too soon.

Wilbur still remembered Techno's fingers carding through his sweaty hair when he was sprawled out along his bathroom floor. He still remembers Phil's gentle words, whispered with lips pressed against his temple. He remembers Sunday dinners, the blaring music a mere background noise to their infectious laughter.

Could they still have that? Could they really be a family again, even after too many years of bitterness and venomous insults?

Tommy leans forward, hand pressing against his knee. "They want to be in your life, and you want them in yours. You just have to let them in."

Wilbur shakes his head. His vision is suspiciously blurry. "No. It's—It's too late. There's too much shit between us."

"It's *never* too late," he says with so much feeling. Too much feeling for one measly android. "They're waiting on you, Wil. You have to make an effort." Wilbur hesitates, fingers pressing against his ribs, feeling the individual bones through his shirt. "Here, invite them over this Sunday. I can't promise it will be easy or even the same, but it will be a *start*."

There's a longer pause, filled only with the sound of leafless branches knocking together with the wind. Wilbur waffles, bottom lip trapped between his harsh teeth.

Tommy taps on his knee until he looks. His eyes are too blue, too hard, and far too knowing. "Stop punishing yourself. *You deserve to be happy.*"

Wilbur sucks in a quiet breath. Hot tears spill down frostbitten cheeks. He doesn't know if he believes it, but Tommy's conviction spreads through him like hot chocolate.

"...Okay," he agrees in a breathless whisper.

"Yeah?" Wilbur nods, and Tommy grins. "Fuck yeah! Oh, this will give me a chance to try out this new recipe I found. It seems easy enough, and I figure if I have a few helping hands —"

Wilbur lets out a watery laugh. "You can't cook for shit."

"No, I guess I can't." His grin turns into something softer, smaller. His eyes stray to the grave in front of him, admiring the moss that has grown on the base of it. "Will you tell me about him, sometime?"

He'd like to. It's only fair to Fundy that his memory is remembered—his gap tooth smile, his penchant for sneaking around the house after bedtime, the obvious mischievous glint he'd get in his eyes; sly as a fox, his little soldier—but the ache in his chest is too sharp. Even saying his name out loud seems like it will shred his lips.

But Tommy has found a special place in his heart, too. Somehow.

So he compromises. "I don't know if I'm ready for that, yet," he admits in a quiet voice, fingers brushing off the dirt and grime that sticks to his son's grave. He'll visit more, he decides with a grim set to his mouth. It's the least he can do after avoiding him for so long.

And Tommy—beautiful, brilliant Tommy—only grins. "That's okay," he says like it's the easiest thing in the world. "I'll still be here when you are."

At some point, Tommy's hand had made its way into his hand. It's bare now, exposed plastic glinting in the cloudy daylight. It seems it's always exposed nowadays, whenever they touch. "You will, won't you," he says, breathy and quiet and *awed*.

It's not a question.

Chapter End Notes

Tommy: *literally lets a deviant run away to help Wilbur up a roof, jumps in front of a gun-wielding deviant for him, frets over him all the time, makes his affection for him no secret *

Wilbur: I think, maybe, possibly, Tommy could care about me. But I might just be crazy and desperate for attention, so...

a showman's mask

Chapter Summary

Wilbur takes Tommy up on his idea. It goes about as well as you'd expect.

Chapter Twenty-Five: A Showman's Mask

The anniversary of Fundy's death came and went without incident, or so Phil can only assume.

Wilbur never called him back—not that he was expecting it, of course—and, other than a cursory text sent fifteen minutes after their disastrous call, Phil hasn't heard from him since.

Phil mourned in his own ways, as he always did, and gave Wilbur the space he so clearly desired. When Fundy's grave was a little fresher and the bruises from the car crash were faded but still present, both Phil and Techno made themselves easily available. And when Sally eventually left and filed for divorce, they never left his side.

He can see, now, how that might've been smothering, but it wasn't until Wilbur continued to decline despite how each day went on—time alone, it seemed, did *not* heal all wounds—that their presence began to grate on him. He started pushing them away, first with his contemptuous stares and next with his spitting, bitter words.

Despite the way his hands itched to reach out after that frankly surprising revelation—how could Wilbur forget; his entire life seemed to revolve around Fundy's death, nowadays—Phil knew that it wasn't his place. He wasn't foolish enough to believe, for a second, that Wil would call if he needed him, but there was nothing else he could do. He was helpless in the worst way possible.

So, Phil accustomed himself to yet another passing year with another dip in Wilbur's behavior. This year stung more than the previous ones, if only because Wil had been doing so *good* lately. The best he'd ever been since they lowered that coffin into the ground. He expected those morning arrivals to dial back to afternoons, and for him to show up drunk and disorderly.

And yet, the next day, Wilbur and Tommy strolled in at a borderline *early* time.

Wilbur looked no worse than usual, despite the way he projected his nerves across the entire bullpen, shoulders drawn in tight and tense. Phil, through stolen, casual glances, would always catch him fiddling with anything he could get his hands on. Also noticeably, Tommy

would occasionally nudge him, shooting significant looks either towards Phil's office or to some remote corner of the bullpen.

Nothing ever came of those looks, other than a deep frown and subtle shake of his head.

They were... planning something, perhaps? Something that involved a captain's permission, if the looks toward his own office were correctly interpreted.

But days passed, and nothing ever changed. Wilbur kept being nervous and tense, and Tommy kept being encouraging. Several times a day he would poke and prod Wilbur until he frowned and swatted at insistent hands. And Phil kept watching, growing more and more restless with every second their intentions went unaired.

Until today, that is.

"Hello mate," Phil says, only blinking rapidly to display his surprise at seeing them. He had stepped out of his office for a quick walk through the bullpen and, when he returned from a brief bathroom break, there they were. He glances between them, drawing what information he can from their faces.

Wilbur is, for lack of a better word, *sulking*. His arms are crossed over his chest, his bottom lip is jutting out in a truly impressive pout, and he can just catch Tommy's hand retreating from his arm, as if he dragged him in here.

Phil breezes past both of them and seats himself in his worn chair. "What can I help you with?" he asks, settling his hands, interlinked, on top of his desk.

Wilbur scowls, eyes focused instead on the way his dirty shoes drag over the carpet.

Phil has some long-buried instinct to scold him for that, but he gets distracted when Tommy elbows Wilbur in the side. His son grunts, and, like he used to do with Techno when they were kids, winds up to elbow him back. Tommy side steps easily, smirking as his elbow barely even brushes the front of his chest. With an even deeper scowl, Wilbur pulls his elbow back into himself and freezes under Phil's expectant stare.

"Oh. We just, uh, well *I* just wanted to ask you a question."

And here it is.

Well, Phil doesn't actually know what he's going to ask, but he knows that he's been gearing up to do it for days. He also knows it can't be anything good. Wilbur is nervous about very few things, and none of them are ever good.

He watches as Wilbur shifts his weight between his feet. "Go ahead."

Wilbur glances at Tommy. He nods, encouragingly, and Wilbur takes a deep breath. "Okay," he says, mostly to himself. "I wanted to know if you... would like to—" his lip curls, disgust tinging his face. Disgust at the words about to leave his lips, disgust at Phil, disgust at *himself*. Phil doesn't know, but he does raise an eyebrow at his stuttering. It must be *really* bad then.

"Would I...?"

Wilbur makes a frustrated noise. His hands open and close with the same restless tension that's been tormenting him for days. He takes another deep breath. "Would you like to come over for dinner this Sunday?"

Phil stares. "What?"

Immediately, Wilbur folds. "I told you this was a dumb idea," he grits out, turning to Tommy with ears burning red.

Phil's mind finally catches up when they're at the door, one hand already on the doorknob to let themselves out. "Wait, no. Wait," he stutters out, mind still reeling but latching onto the fact that *Wilbur* asked him to have dinner. *Wilbur*, his volatile, wayward son. Voluntarily inviting him back into his life.

Surely his old ears are still deceiving him, but Phil would rather play the fool than risk letting him slip through his fingers again.

By some miracle, Wilbur waits. It may have more to do with Tommy's hand on his elbow rather than any goodwill on Phil's part, but he'll take it. "I—" Phil blinks. His mind is still ridiculously blank, latched onto the color still kissing Wilbur's ears rather than on the words that need to leave his mouth.

Silence fills the space between them. With every passing second, Wilbur looks more and more like this was one giant mistake.

But then Tommy is nudging him and making some complicated expression with his face. And the tension eases from Wilbur's shoulders. He's rolling his eyes then, knocking his shoulder back into Tommy's.

"Okay," he says, again, like he's steeling himself against some attack rather than a conversation with his father. And isn't that depressing? "I may have not been very good, lately." He shoves his hands in his pockets, shoulders tensing up once again. "Or, you know, in the past—the past few years. Since, well, you know." He clears his throat. "And I've been well—I haven't— well, the thing is—" he makes another frustrated noise, teeth sinking into his lip.

It is interesting, he thinks, to see someone so good with words stumble. He thinks that must mean something important. Or maybe he's reading into the situation too much.

Wilbur is silent for a long time, but Phil lets him think. His head is turned towards the large window, eyes tracking some bird that perches in the bushes. "I've been blaming you guys for abandoning me," he says slowly, carefully. "And while that isn't... entirely inaccurate, I haven't been acknowledging that I was pushing you guys away, as well. I haven't been—" he lets out a quiet breath. "—taking any blame for what happened."

Phil stares. Faintly, he hopes he isn't outright gaping at him. That wouldn't be very appropriate, nor would it encourage this sudden change of heart.

"And I know that one measly dinner isn't— it isn't going to fix *anything*. It isn't going to unfuck Techno and I's relationship, or—or take back all the shitty things we've all said to each other but—" he glances at Tommy. "But I want to try. I'm *ready* to try. And I—" he huffs, softly. "Well, I guess I miss you guys, or whatever."

It's like all the air has been sucked out of his lungs. Phil stares and stares, heart beating in his throat. No words come to mind or offer themselves up as sacrifices. Anything he could say seems horribly inadequate, but Wilbur is looking at him and—*fuck him*—he looks *hopeful*.

"Yeah," he says, pitifully, shamefully, breathlessly. "Yeah, that's— I've missed you, too, Wil."

Wilbur nods, jerkily. Next to him, Tommy is trying to smother his grin with his hand.

"Have you, uh, asked Techno yet?"

There's a slight downward twitch to his lips, but other than that, Wil's expression stays steady. That's progress, he thinks. "No. No, you were the, uh, the easier of the two. And Tommy suggested I start out easy." He jerks his thumb towards Tommy. "But, uh, I plan on asking him before the day is up. In a little bit. When my legs stop shaking." He laughs, and it sounds like it hurts.

Always the entertainer. Always willing to cut up raw pieces of himself on the off chance it will make someone laugh.

Phil smiles, but it feels sad on his face.

"Well, we should get back to work," Wilbur says after a too-long silence, bordering on painfully awkward. He nods to Tommy, then again to Phil when he wishes the duo a good rest of their day.

And then, as they turn to leave, Tommy leaves into Wilbur's space. Their shoulders knock together, and Phil is struck breathless when Wilbur automatically leans down to hear what he has to say. "I'm so fucking proud of you, Wil," Tommy says, face turned just so. It allows Phil to see the bright grin stretching across his face. He's struck by the difference, by how *natural* it looks on his face.

Wilbur scowls, leaning away to rub at a ruby red ear. "Shut up," he mutters. Tommy only laughs in response, soft and fond and contained to just the two of them. A proper pair.

The door swings shut behind them, cutting off his view. Despite it, he stares as if he'll be able to see them if he focuses hard enough.

What the absolute *fuck*.

Techno, surveyor of subtleties and student of the art of hidden things, was not for want of

knowledge in their tiny prescient. He knew everything about everyone, and he knew how to read body language across the room.

It really is amazing how often people will underestimate the 'stick in the mud', quiet detective, even when he's in the room. They always assume he doesn't care, that he doesn't want to know the intricacies of their mundane lives. And, for the most part, they're right. He doesn't care. Not about them and not about how Gary is considering a divorce or how Susan is sleeping with a woman twice her age.

But information is information, no matter the content, and Techno cares about being out of the loop. If people won't tell him things, that's fine. That's more than fine. He's accustomed to working for the things he wants, and this is no different.

So, to say he's a little miffed when Wilbur and Tommy slink out of Phil's office with neutral bodies that reveal absolutely nothing. Well, it would be a bit of an understatement.

He knows that Wilbur has been antsy for the past few days, but he had mistakenly—*foolishly*—attributed that to the aftermath of Fundy's anniversary. He'd missed the hasty looks shot towards their father's office until it was too late, and now Techno has no idea what transpired. He *could* ask Phil—he'd caught him staring at Wilbur a few times with something like puzzlement when he did his daily rounds earlier—but he gets the feeling that he won't tell.

He usually *is* more receptive and doting following the days after Fundy's anniversary. Maybe Wilbur is exploiting this detail to... what? What is his goal here? To get Tommy off his back? That's unlikely, considering how close they stand to each other nowadays. To get off the case? Also unlikely, considering the recent uptick in importance because of the broadcast that went out across the nation.

Techno loses a few good minutes into deciphering the enigma that is his brother. But, when Wilbur and Tommy settle down at their desks, he figures no good will come from feeding his imagination. Instead, he buckles down and starts sorting through the mountain of files on his desk. There's so much information to go through, to sort out which are good and which are a bunch of nonsense.

He gets maybe an hour of streamlined work before his focus is broken.

"I don't want to do this," the whiney voice of his brother declares in a harsh whisper. When Techno glances up from the pen scrawling across a file, he finds that Wilbur and Tommy are loitering near his desk. Wilbur's back is towards him.

"Yes, you do," Tommy says easily, as if this is an argument they've had many, many times. He shoves Wilbur back. "No one said this was going to be easy. In fact, I'm pretty sure I said that it wasn't." Wilbur grumbles something likely unsavory. "But you do want to do this. You wouldn't be here if you didn't."

With a groan, Wilbur turns on his heel. He freezes when he sees that Techno's been staring at him, but he doesn't back down, even when his ears, in classic Wilbur fashion, flush. He takes the last few steps it takes to stand right in front of his desk and shoves his hands in his pockets.

Techno raises a brow. This is an unexpected development.

Wilbur is looking appropriately grumpy, and Tommy is wildly oscillating between encouraging—to Wilbur, of course; he's nudging him with his shoulder or his elbow, nodding or shooting him a thumbs up whenever he looks—and contemptuous.

Techno has no idea what to make of this. He feels wrong-footed and unsure, and so he settles for glaring at both of them. "What?" Admittedly, it comes out much harsher than he intended, but, in his defense, he thinks it's a bit fair. His brother hasn't interacted with him in a way that hasn't ended in a fight in months. Years even, maybe.

He doesn't know what to expect out of this interaction, but he doesn't think it can be anything good. Especially if Wilbur is approaching not out of his own volition, if the way Tommy's fingers are prodding his back is any indication.

His voice—or the tone found within it—seems to have the opposite effect on Wilbur that Tommy's does. His hands curl into fists, and his jaw tightens until it pops. He doesn't lash out like he so clearly wants to, though. They always seem to know just how to push each other's buttons, but—ever since their final fight, the one in the kitchen of that murder victim—it seems even the sight of them can be enough to activate their primal instincts.

"I just wanted to ask you—" and then he promptly shuts his mouth, looking so incredibly annoyed with both himself and Techno. "I've already invited Phil, uh, to dinner this Sunday. So now..." he says through grit teeth. He can't even say it; he can't even offer the invitation to Techno without stumbling through it.

And while Techno is completely and utterly surprised—this is the last thing he expected to hear—he's also a younger brother who's been scorned by his older brother one too many times.

He leans forward, elbows digging into the rough microplastic, or whatever it is that makes up his desk, and he frowns. "I'm not really sure what you're trying to say there," he says.

It works almost immediately. His eyebrows twitch in an effort to maintain the same, semi-neutral expression, and he lets out a low, irritated breath. "Sunday dinner," he says again, purposefully and obnoxiously slow. As if this is a hearing issue instead of him saying something completely absurd. "This Sunday."

"Huh. I don't really know why you're telling me, since you've just invited Phil."

Wilbur opens his mouth, bitterness and rage in his eyes, but stops when Tommy places a hand on his elbow. He takes a moment, chest expanding with each deep, calming breath he takes. And, when he speaks again, it's with a barely held onto calm. "Would you like to come to dinner this Sunday?"

And now that Techno's gotten what he wanted—an official invitation, needled out from between unwilling lips—he doesn't really know what to say.

Sunday dinners used to be his favorite part of the week. In their childhood, he found them annoying, at first, when he still wasn't quite sure what to make of Phil and his easy grins. However, they really flourished in adulthood, when they provided a great way to stay connected despite their busy schedules. They only became more important when Wilbur became a father at such an early age, because then he had an easy opportunity to spend time with his nephew.

They did even try to continue the tradition after Fundy's death. Wilbur was barely even a person when the wound was still oozing pus, and even when Phil carefully brought up the idea a year later, it was firmly shut down.

But now, with their family as fractured as it is now, Techno can't imagine it would go well.

Wilbur obviously had enough trouble even asking him to come. He can't imagine trying to spend a whole three hours scrunched together at Wilbur's tiny dining room table without an argument arising.

Techno and Phil haven't even talked about something non-work or Wilbur related in *months*. And Phil has been simultaneously walking around eggshells and choking on his irritation with Wilbur and his behavior. Add Tommy into the mix—which he doubts he'd be at the actual dinner, but just having him in the house and seeing evidence of his existence is enough to piss Techno off, even just at the thought—and it's a certified recipe for disaster.

"Do you really think that's a good idea?"

Wilbur stiffens, his lip curling up like it was just waiting. "You—"

"Listen," Techno interrupts. He isn't trying to get on Wilbur's bad side or piss him off, but he can still feel the tension singeing in the air. "We can barely even work together without dissolving into some kind of glares or—or trading insults. Do you *really* think having dinner together won't end the same way?"

It's the ridiculously naïve thinking of someone hopeful and a little too stupid. Techno shakes his head, pulling his work into the forefront of his focus again.

"I—" Wilbur seethes, cutting off only when Tommy nudges him. He looks downright murderous but takes in a deep breath through his nose.

"It's a nice idea," he allows with a dip of his head. The pen fits in his hand, and he clicks it a few times, instinctively. "But I don't think it's very realistic. I think we just have to accept that this is how it will always be."

Wilbur slams his hands on his desk, rattling his pen holder and making his computer shudder. "*Bullshit.*"

The officers around them quiet down, but a quick glare around the room from *Tommy* of all people has them returning back to their work.

Meanwhile, Techno stares at Wilbur, nostrils flared and hands tightening around the pen in his hand.

"Bullshit. Jesus, do you even hear yourself? *You* told me to change. *You* told me to *try*." He holds his arms out, dramatically. "Well, here I am."

Techno stares, jaw clenched. He feels not unlike a bull, holding steady but feeling more and more restless to charge with every second. He holds his ground.

"I had a beer last night," Wilbur says as if it isn't such a rapid change from before. Techno blinks and tries not to end up with whiplash. "I had a beer last night, and it was my first drink in seven days." Techno sucks in a quiet breath. "Let me rephrase. I had *one* beer last night, and it was my first drink in seven days. And it's been weeks since I've come into work any time past noon."

Silence, other than the quiet sounds of typing and shuffling papers, fills the space between them.

Wilbur leans back, hands still braced on his desk but less in his face. "I'm trying here, Tech. For the first time, I am seriously trying. It isn't going to be easy, and it isn't going to be how it used to be. Fuck, this entire conversation is a perfect testament to that." He clenches his jaw, and Techno traces the motion with his eyes. "But I'm willing to try, and I think you're a fucking coward if you aren't as well."

Then, without waiting to see his reaction, Wilbur walks off. Tommy lingers for a moment, glancing between the two of them. For a moment, it looks like he's going to say something, but he shakes his head and backs away. He must've read something in Techno's murderous expression that warded him away.

Techno watches for longer than he's comfortable admitting. He feels hot with anger and shame, teeth grinding into each other as he attempts to upend his focus.

Isn't this what he wanted? Isn't this everything he's been thinking about? Wilbur actually trying. He's been showing up to work on time, he's been looking healthier and happier, and he has, apparently, been limiting his drinking. Isn't this what he tried to get him to do?

So why, then, does he feel so helplessly bitter?

He huffs out a short breath, smooths his hand over his face, and turns back to his work. For a few minutes, he stares, unseeing, at a form on his desk. His pen tip is touching it, ink bleeding onto the paper, but he can't do anything to stop it. His mind revolves around one thing and one thing only.

Why couldn't Wilbur do this when he asked? Was he not worth changing for? What did Tommy have that he didn't?

It only takes about ten minutes of stewing in silence and in his own bitter thoughts for Techno to cave. Later, he'll claim that it was only the challenge issued and the childhood competitiveness that never quite abated when it came to his brother. But, for now, he'll tear

off a clean sheet of paper, hastily scribble down his confirmation, and then carefully fold it into the perfect paper airplane.

And, when he tosses it, he looks away before he can catch the smug smile on Wilbur's face.

November 19th, 2038

6:30 PM

The doorbell rings, echoing morosely through the entire house.

Tommy is at attention before he even realizes it, hands dripping with soapy water from dirty dishes still lingering in the sink. Wilbur—who's standing across from him, attending to the pasta simmering on the stove—looks up. His face is twisted with alarm, mouth pulled down by his worry.

"Should I—" Tommy shakes his head, waving away the question with one soapy hand. "No, no you get it." For all his encouragement, he isn't unaware of what his presence in this home means. He isn't oblivious to the seething looks from Techno nor has he missed the many frustrating—the teeth-clenching, fists curling kind of frustrating—phone conversations with Phil.

This is a family night, and Tommy is not family. He knows this, despite the way he still lingers in the kitchen, fingers brushing against the assorted silverware that floats in the murky depths.

Wilbur glances between the pasta and the door before caving with his mouth in a thin line. He wipes his hands off on his ridiculous, tatty apron—which just says DILF in big block letters, which is, admittedly, a little sad, all things considered—that he pulled out of the attic for this occasion and makes his way to the door.

With one last nervous look at Tommy, he pulls it open, and there they are.

They're both a little overdressed for the evening, especially compared to he and Wilbur—Tommy is wearing a pair of borrowed sweatpants and a baggy t-shirt, and Wilbur isn't looking much better—but he figures it will be okay. Techno is just wearing his usual work clothes, as if he came straight to here from work—which he probably did—and Phil filters in after him in a collared button-up. He's got some kind of bakery box in his hands and an awkward smile on his lips.

"I didn't— Well, I know we used to cook together, traditionally, but I figured—" Phil clears his throat, and, instead of digging himself into a hole by trying—and failing—to explain, he just holds up the box. "I brought banana bread."

Yep. This is about as painfully awkward as Tommy suspected it would be. But they had to start somewhere, and that somewhere is Techno looming over Phil's shoulder like a socially

awkward bear.

Wilbur steps away from the door, half-heartedly gesturing to the pile of shoes by the doorway. Then, with a small grimace and a pale face, he's making a tactical retreat back into the kitchen. He immediately takes up his former post, stirring the sauce into the noodles with a ferocity that betrays his anxiety.

Phil follows, glancing around the house like he's never been before. Tommy figures it must be weird to be back after so long—a place that used to be like a second home and now it is, decidedly, not. His posture is a little tense, but in the end, he loiters casually on the other side of the kitchen counter. "Hello, Tommy."

"Captain," he shoots back easily with a tense nod. Things between him and Phil are still a little weird, since their entire relationship consisted of passive-aggressive comments over the phone. He figures that he can be the bigger person here, if only because he's getting worried that Wilbur is going to set something on fire with his glare. "How has your day been so far?"

Phil, at least, seems grateful that *someone* is trying to ease the tension that pollutes the air. He smiles, small and strained, and launches into a detailed description of his day. It wasn't very eventful it seems, especially since, after a few prodding comments, Techno was the only one who had work.

Tommy almost wishes they had worked today, if only because Wilbur spent the entire day stress grocery shopping and scrubbing at a spotless counter.

After a polite and cursory question about drinks, Phil pops his head into their—less sparse now, thanks to Wilbur's anxiety—refrigerator and comes out with two cans of soda. He freezes when standing up, eyes locked onto the myriad of notes decorating the front. "Hey Wil," he says, getting an acknowledging hum for his trouble. "What's this?"

Wilbur looks and immediately, automatically, he sighs. "It's nothing. Forget you even saw it."

Tommy presses his lips together, letting the water drip from his hands into the sink. Then, just to be a dick, he wipes them off on Wilbur's apron. Their lovely chef makes a distressed noise and bats his hands away. "It's the number of a really cool therapist that I am *trying to get him to call*." With each word, Tommy, who's still lingering in Wilbur's space, pokes him in the side.

"And I told you, I am *fine*." This time, Wilbur smacks his hand with the spoon he's using, which leaves a massive splotch of sauce on the back of his hand. Tommy frowns and wipes it off on Wilbur's face.

"Fine? This is what you call fine?" he demands, smiling despite the subject matter at the way Wilbur groans in annoyance. He rips off a paper towel from the roll, scraping the sauce off and then flinging it at Tommy.

"Yes. We aren't having this argument again, Tommy."

That's that, apparently, despite the weighted looks Techno and Phil exchange. They wisely don't comment. Tommy thinks it would go worse than even his needling.

The food finishes up pretty quickly—Wilbur had meticulously planned it out that way, so that the food wouldn't grow cold but that he would still be cooking when they arrived—and he easily plates it. The dining table is already set for three, and, as Wilbur gets everything finalized, Tommy takes this as his cue to leave.

He's already edging his way towards the hallway, farewells already poised on his lips, when Wilbur's confusion hits him. "Wait, where are you going?"

Tommy jerks his head back towards the dimly light hallway. "Well, I figured I'd just hang out in your room," he says. His smile feels strained on his face, but he really wants this night to go well for Wilbur. He'll be damned if he's the thing that ultimately ruins it. "Don't worry. I won't be an intrusion." He laughs and takes a step towards the hallway.

Wilbur makes a noise of protest, standing up from his chair like he'll tackle Tommy if he refuses. "You don't— You're not an intrusion," he says, and—fuck him—he sounds earnest about it, too. His face is open and vulnerable in a way it usually isn't around his family. In a way that Tommy associates with late-night movies and Wilbur's prone body curled around itself in bed. He reaches out, unsure and worried. "Come on, stay."

Tommy wavers for a moment. He glances around Wilbur's pleading expression to Phil and Techno for any sort of confirmation. What he gets back is a mixed result; Phil gives him a tight-lipped smile that's just a little too tense to be completely genuine, and Techno, unsurprisingly, glares.

But Tommy, if nothing else, strives to be useful. He can't leave Wilbur high and dry, stuck at a dinner in between two people who have, at least in the past few years, done nothing but disappoint him. And if this night goes anything like his stellar invitations, it seems like he'll need the extra emotional support.

So, with a weak smile, he allows Wilbur to pull him across the room, pull out the chair next to him, and gently—lovingly, he thinks—push him into the seat without another word of protest. Wilbur seats himself, and then, without further ado, they dig in.

The atmosphere surrounding Wilbur's tiny dining table is... well, tense is a kinder word for it, Tommy thinks.

Techno and Wil are sitting across from each other which, in hindsight, probably wasn't the good idea they thought it was. Techno is one big ball of tensed muscles, hands tightened in fists around his silverware, and Wilbur isn't doing much better. His leg is in constant motion, bouncing in a way that jostles the table.

The record player fades out into the gentle static between songs, and a new song comes out. There was a lot of heavy debate about the music choice, but, in the end, Wilbur left it up to Tommy's discretion. After going through his entire record collection, he decided on the only jazz record because it seemed like it inspired a relaxing atmosphere.

Not that it was doing any good right now.

"So," Tommy says just to fill the silence. After the perfunctory praise to Wilbur for the food—to which Tommy had wisely held back his comments about how he, ultimately, found it—they ate in a damp, sticky cloud of tension. "How has work been, Captain?"

Phil glances between Techno—who is resolutely staring at the pasta—and Wilbur—who is watching the clock tick—before giving Tommy a strained, grateful smile. "It's been alright," he says and then continues in-depth about the past few weeks. He hasn't been nearly as busy as Tommy and Wilbur suddenly are, but being captain comes with its own massive workload.

On top of managing an entire precinct, he has to oversee the red ice investigation—at this, Phil shoots Techno a look; his jaw is clenched, eyes locked onto his plate—and that's been busier than ever since they just recently gained a new lead.

"And how has work been for you two?" Phil asks when his words falter and he's exhausted retelling parts of his week to appease the awkwardness threatening to close in on them.

Wilbur and Tommy exchange a look—silently wondering who will take the floor now—and eventually Wilbur concedes defeat. It is his family, after all, and his party. It's his floor.

"It's been—" Wilbur starts awkwardly and quickly falters. How best to describe the absolute whirlwind that has been their investigations over the past few weeks. "—informative," he settles on. He hesitates for another moment, fingers fiddling together as the jazz music filters back in. He wavers for a moment before apparently deciding he's all in. "And... interesting."

With a quickly growing grin—a fake, Tommy notes easily—Wilbur launches into an overdramatic description of some of their lighter cases. It's a showman's mask, he realizes as he watches Wilbur quickly enrapture Phil with his excessive gestures and the forced grin on his face. He's very convincing, and it seems he knows exactly what to say to pull his audience in.

"And then—and, please remember, this is an *eighty* year old woman—dentures in the cup, knitting needles on the temporarily abandoned rocking chair, the whole grandma shebang—and she bats her eyelashes at me." Phil laughs out loud, amused disbelief written over his face. Even Techno huffs, palm smothering his reluctant smile. "And they're clumpy and stuck together with what I can only assume is old mascara, and I ignore it, because I'm polite and I figured she was just lonely. But she excuses herself and when she comes back, her cheeks are covered in this very obvious blush all over her cheeks. And then—"

This was, of course, during their slow period not that long ago. Just a week ago, they had cursed and spat and wished for some big case to alleviate their boredom. And the universe delivered Tubbo right into their laps. He isn't sure whether to be grateful for it or annoyed that it came in the form of a goddamn *revolution*.

"And as we're leaving, she fucking *pinches* my ass."

Even Techno isn't able to smother his laugh this time, quiet and breathy and sliding through the cracks in his fingers.

And despite the more relaxed atmosphere, the whole house feels cramped and too tight. Because, right now, it's all *fake*. A family pretending like there aren't piles of shattered glass from knocked-over pictures on the floor between them. As if they haven't broken each other and their trust. As if everything is fine and okay, and humor is oozing out of Wilbur like a sickly cologne. He's smiling wide, stretched over his cheeks and so *fake*.

He's smiling like he believes that if he stops, he'll collapse.

Tommy zones out again.

Wilbur seems to have slotted easily into this well-defined role of 'entertainer'. It isn't him—not be a long shot—but some caricature a few feet to the left. Now that his lips have parted for the first time, it doesn't seem like he can stop. Like if the silence descends like an executioner's axe, then it's all over. Their little play pretend at a real family will crumble into dust right before their eyes.

"And then he leaps off, slides down a slanted glass roof, and lands on a fucking *moving* train —"

Oh, he's talking about Tommy.

Tommy blinks, tuning back in just as a hand lands on his shoulder. Wilbur is looking at him with something indescribably fond in his eyes. "You're a fucking menace," he says with no small amount of warmth, and Tommy can't help the answering smile. It's practically automatic at this point; Wilbur smiles, Tommy smiles.

He blinks again, dispelling the last of his 'zone-out' by sheer force of will alone. "Yeah, well," he cuts in when it becomes clear that Wilbur needs a break from his tireless job. Everyone is done with their meal by now, seconds and thirds had, and the pasta is almost all gone. Their plates are all instinctively pushed in towards the center, elbows digging into the table.

"It's not all fun and games." He thinks of Wilbur's hands scraped raw on the edge of the roof. "And we've got our hands full with this new—" he pauses, lips pressed together into a thin line. "Well, *rebellion* seems like too big a word for it." For right now. Tommy has no illusions it will stay that way, unless they interfere.

Phil makes a sound of interest, fingers linking together. "Yeah, the FBI's been sticking their nose in your case. It's clear they want to take it off your hands, but Cyberlife's been telling them to back off."

"Oh, that's good. Still meant we had to deal with that dick Perkins during our last investigation." Wilbur laughs and nudges Tommy with his shoulder. "God, that guy is... not pleasant."

"Wow, tell us how you really feel," Wilbur says, and Tommy's self control frays like an old rope.

"He's fucking sweaty and balding and he's got these beady little eyes like a little rodent, but not even like a cute rodent, just like one that's full of evil and hatred and—and rabies. And god, he thinks he's all that. *Don't fuck up my crime scene*," he mimics in Perkin's actual voice. Wilbur lets out a delighted, surprised laugh.

"Um, but yeah," Tommy coughs awkwardly, eyes watching as Wilbur fiddles with the used fork on his plate. "The investigation right now is picking up, with the uh, the broadcast sent out by Tubbo."

Phil's brow furrows. "Tubbo?"

"Oh, yeah, that's his name," Tommy explains. He glances at Wilbur once—mostly just checking that he isn't really crossing any lines here—and, when he receives the okay, he continues. "There's an article all about him. He's a unique prototype crafted specifically for someone. But! What's really interesting is that it looks like his system took some permanent damage. The skin around the right side of his face warps, which often indicates a low thirium level, but, in his case, I'm guessing it means some damage to the chassis underneath." His voice eventually tapers out, lost in analyzing the images in his mind.

"Do you think he's telling the truth? That he wants to go about this peacefully?"

"Well, I think that *he thinks* that's the ideal. I don't know how receptive humanity will be to his message, so I don't know how long he'll be able to hold to that." Tommy shrugs. "Either way, it doesn't matter. He needs to be stopped before deviancy spreads anymore."

The conversation falls silent. The record switches to another song.

"How's, uh—" Wilbur coughs, clearing it out when his voice catches. Tommy glances towards the counter, where Phil left the box of banana bread, and wonders if it would be a faux pas if he brought it over. "How's your case going?"

Techno startles at being addressed, eyes jerking up from where they had been focused somewhere out one of the darkened windows. When he finally finds his words, he answers with a riveting, "It's busy. Like Phil said, new leads to look into."

Wilbur nods. "That's good." There's a long pause in which he clearly leaves space for Techno to keep talking. When he doesn't, Wil presses his lips together. "And, uh, how have you been doing?"

Techno shrugs. "Busy." This man is never short of absolutely thrilling things to say, it seems. "A lot of overtime at work."

Tommy exchanges a look with Phil. It seems, despite whatever animosity they share over the phone, that they are unlikely allies in the battle against silence and tension.

"And your garden? How's it coming this year?"

Tommy perks up. "Oh, you have a garden?" he asks. Techno scowls at him, which is an answer in and of itself. "I gardened once."

Wilbur scoffs. "When did you garden?"

Tommy doesn't really feel like explaining the process of his reports or how he met with Dream in that weird, metal space created for them to chat, so he simply shrugs. "It was before we met," he says simply. "At Cyberlife headquarters." As he keeps speaking, he realizes just how absolutely ridiculous this sounds. "They had me garden?"

"What?" Wilbur's face is scrunched up in confusion, and Tommy feels his LED burn a brief yellow. "Why?"

"I dunno. To teach me coordination?" he shrugs and then turns back to Techno before Wilbur can read the fib in his face. "It was very nice, though. The feeling of dirt around my hands, under my nails. The smell of earth and the sun beating on the back of my neck." He can almost feel it now, and he barely resists closing his eyes just to lose himself in the sensation. "It was very nice," he repeats. "Although, I don't understand why we had to get rid of the weeds. They're plants, too, you know. They deserve to be there just as much."

Techno's arms are crossed over his chest and his mouth is turned down in a frown, but, somehow, he looks more approachable than before. There's a certain softness—or rather a lack of previous hardness—to his eyes. "Yeah, but they grow out of control and choke out other plants to get ahead. They can effectively kill a garden, if you leave them in."

He frowns. "But they look so nice. Why can't you have a plant garden and one for the weeds? So you remove whatever weeds you dig up and plant them in a separate place."

Techno's face scrunches up. "Because they're ugly."

Tommy thinks of the weeds in Dream's garden. He thinks of the cheerful little dandelions poking out of the dirt or the chickweed growing in a complex, vine-like structure across the ground. "Are they, or has society just conditioned you to believe that?" he prods.

Techno is silent for a moment, other than a very quiet and contemplative, 'huh'. "Well... my garden is alright. The first batch of potatoes turned out really well, and the second is doing alright so far. They'll be ready on schedule."

At this point, Phil saves them from yet another dangerous silence. He gets up, declaring dinner over and bringing their dirty plates to the sink. Then, when he returns, he brings a serrated knife and the banana bread.

After cutting and dividing pieces out, they dig in. The silence is a little more comfortable—since it's a food-enjoying related silence, rather than the other, more insidious types—but there's something off about Wilbur. He's picking off pieces of his slice, rubbing them between his fingers until the soft bread smears against his fingers. When it sticks there permanently, he sticks them in his mouth.

Tommy's known Wilbur long enough—and analyzed enough of his behavior—to recognize when he wants to say something. He leans over, nudging him gently with his elbow until he frowns.

"Listen," he starts, low and private. Techno and Phil immediately look up, matching frowns on their faces. "I—I just wanted to thank you guys for being here. I know what you must've thought about my offer— I mean, fuck, I had a hard enough time getting you here. I know that we've really... fell off the family wagon, recently, and a good part of that is... my fault." He swallows, promptly sticking a chunk of bread in his mouth so he can delay the inevitable.

Tommy gently kicks his shin. He's rewarded with a soft scowl.

"So I just wanted you guys to know that—that—" he's frowning so hard, harsh lines drawn on his cheeks. "I'm sorry," he grits out between clenched teeth, between harsh breaths. It's silent, other than the ticking clock. Even the record has shut off. "And I promise I'm trying this time. Tommy's been—" his eyes dart up to Tommy, who smiles under his attention. "—a massive help. He's been keeping me accountable, with, uh, with the drinking. And he's been here for me."

When you guys weren't goes unsaid but not unheard, if the way they both stiffen is any indication.

Phil smiles, and Tommy isn't imagining how pained he looks. Still, he reaches out, patting Wilbur's wrist with a calloused hand. At his side, Techno is a stoic and unreadable presence. "I'm glad," Phil says and means it, despite the furrow to his brow.

It's a nice night, all things considered. It's cold but not snowy, dewy ice drops clinging to the individual blades of grass. The sky is cloudless, revealing a clear if not dim view of the stars. Somewhere in the dark street, some kind of nocturnal creature skitters past, pausing long enough to give them a glowing-eyed assessment.

The door shuts behind them after another round of goodbyes, claims of doing this again—which actually sounded genuine—and one last burst of calming jazz music. Techno and he stand shoulder and shoulder on Wilbur's shitty front porch, stone crumbling beneath their feet. Their breath fogs the air, catching the golden light from Wilbur's windows.

Swathed in darkness, Phil grins up at the sky. "Say it," he says, breathless with happiness. He was *right*. After years of fucking everything up with his oldest son, he did something *right*. And now Wilbur is finally *healing*. "Tell me I was right."

Besides him, he can feel Techno's disgruntlement coming off in waves. He hates androids almost as much as his brother did, except, now, Wilbur doesn't hate them. He lives with one, and smiles at one, and gets into tiny sauce smearing contests with one. And Techno hates admitting he was wrong more than anything in the world.

But, after a moment of silence, their breath mingling in the frosty air, he sighs. "I don't know how or why it worked—" he admits in a low tone. "But it did."

creator and creation

Chapter Summary

Wilbur and Tommy meet with the elusive founder of Cyberlife. Revelations are had and conclusions are drawn.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Twenty-Six: Creator and Creation

November 21st, 2038

11:17 AM

"Oh, you're fucking kidding me," Wilbur mutters, craning his head down to look through the windshield. They're driving along a rocky dirt road, approaching what is, in the simplest terms possible, a log cabin mansion. It's massive, with rough river stones and raw wood making up the bulk of it, and it's sitting right on a frozen lake. A thick chimney sits on the very top, and smoke curls, inviting, from it.

"Somehow, this wasn't what I was expecting," Tommy says as the car rolls to a stop in front of it. The drive had been long, since the lake itself is about an hour outside of the city, and that didn't even account for all the winding through the forest they had to do to get here. It had not been an easy drive—with the non-existent road and the snow pouring down since they woke up—but they got here.

Tommy still has no idea how Wilbur actually managed to pull a meeting with Sam—the elusive found of Cyberlife and the creator of most of the android models people know and love today—but here they are, parked outside of his large abode. Stepping onto his land and into the few inches of snow that coats their shoes with wetness.

"Jesus," Wilbur swears as he slams the door shut behind him. It reverberates through the air, the only noise except for the soft sound of wet snow meeting wet snow. It's just cold enough to snow, but what's falling from the sky is more slush than anything else. It lands in wet plops on Tommy's face and melts in his hair. A gust of wind rips through the two of them, and Wilbur shoves his hands into his pockets. "It's too fucking early for this."

Everything is white—the sky, the lake, the ground—except for the cabin, which is a stark brown blob with glowing windows. A lighthouse in a white desert.

They make their way up the ramp at the entrance and stand under a small awning at the front door. Wilbur leans over, red thumb finding the doorbell. It makes a silly little chime that echoes throughout the entire house, but, after a few seconds, nobody opens the door. Wilbur glances behind them, eyes scanning their barren horizon, before he turns. He leans forward to press it again, but the door finally swings open.

In its place is an android. It's an old model—an RT600, the first model capable of passing the Turing test and one of the first models produced by Cyberlife—with light brown hair and an extremely bulky build. He looks at them expectantly, eyes neutral and assessing rather than blank. There is something more life-like about this android than any other—excluding deviants, of course.

Wilbur blinks at him, taking him in with a furrowed brow. There is something conflicting about seeing an android in a green cut-off shirt—that matches his eyes, oddly—standing across from two heavily bundled people. "Uh..." he shakes his head, sending droplets of melted snow everywhere, and seems to gather his wits. "Lieutenant Wilbur Soot, here to see Mr. Sam."

The android's expression relaxes, his mouth curling into a smile. There's something about it, though—maybe just how toothy it is, or how slanted it is—that reminds him of a shark. There isn't anything threatening about it—unlikely Schlatt's sleazy smirk—but instead radiates genuine joy. The android reminds him, vaguely, of a golden retriever.

"Come on in," he says, opening the door wider so they can slip in past him. It's much nicer in here, warm and cozy, with a fireplace crackling away in a lobby-like little receiving room. The android shuts the door behind them. "If you'll wait here, I'll go check to see if Sam's ready to speak to you."

Then, with a firm nod, he disappears behind a larger, grander door across from them that slides open and shut automatically.

The sitting room is, admittedly, much more what Tommy was expecting. It doesn't fit the murder-cabin-in-the-middle-of-the-woods aesthetic he's got going on, but it is pretty nice. It's got a much more modern look with light marble floors, plaster walls painted dark green, and a high vaulted, wooden ceiling. There are a few padded chairs pushed against the wall, across from the grand door, with a small table between them.

After a moment—when it becomes clear the android isn't coming right back—Wilbur sits down in one of the chairs, legs crossed over one another. He gestures to the other chair, but Tommy is too antsy to sit. Not when there is so little information on the internet about Sam. Not when Tommy's been presented with a veritable treasure trove of information.

Did he choose the design of this place, or did it come like this? What about this place—other than the obvious solitude—drew him in? Why, out of all android models, did he have an RT600 serving him?

He does a lap around the room, taking in everything there is to see. After a quick stop near the fireplace—which fills the room with both heat and gentle, flickering orange light—he realizes, after a quick scan, that the fire isn't real at all. They're electronic and, when Tommy runs his hand through them, it almost feels like real fire. The flames wrap around his hand, kissing his skin with gentle warmth rather than agonizing pain.

Standing up from his awkward crouch, he continues to walk along the walls. There are a number of pictures scattered around, decorating the space haphazardly. Most of them are of inconsequential things—a beach at sunrise, a snowy mountain, a picture of this cabin in the summertime with its lake glinting in the sun—but there are a few of actual substance.

By the front door, there's a picture of a large white dog—a Samoyed—and then, by the grand door, one of a much younger Sam wearing a black cap and gown. He's standing next to someone, smiles on both of their faces. When he sees this one, he pauses and takes a step closer to admire it.

There's something incredibly familiar about the other man, although Tommy can't place him. His hair is a familiar sandy blonde, his eyes a vibrant green, and there are freckles smattered across the bridge of his nose. When he scans both faces, only Sam's profile pops up. The other man pulls up a profile, but it keeps glitching in and out of existence every time Tommy focuses on it.

Confused and with a familiar itch underneath his skin, Tommy narrows his eyes. The two are friendly, it seems, and the unknown man's arm is thrown around Sam's shoulder. He looks to be in his mid-twenties, much older than Sam at the time. A brother, maybe? A friend? A professor, even?

He really does look familiar. His smile is smaller than Sam's but no less sincere, and Tommy *swears* he's seen that smile before. Every time he tries to prod his mind further, it's like he hits some kind of mental wall.

"Ready to meet your maker?" Wilbur asks out of nowhere, drawing Tommy away from the picture and his own swirling thoughts. He gives the strange, familiar man one last glare before turning to face Wilbur.

"I mean, Sam left Cyberlife long before I was created, so he isn't *exactly* my creator," he says with a shrug. That honor belongs to George and a few other programmers and mechanics. And he's been working with them ever since he gained consciousness for the first time. "But I guess he is the father of the modern android. And it was his incredible breakthroughs with his biocomponents that got Cyberlife out of the weeds." He shrugs again.

Wilbur hums and leans forward, linking his hands together so he can prop his chin up on them. "What do we know about this guy?"

Tommy does a quick search, but it doesn't turn up anything he didn't already know. "Not a lot. He's not much older than you, and a genius by every definition of the word. He graduated college when he was sixteen with a dual degree in engineering and robotics. He founded Cyberlife about a year after. Two years ago, he retired, moved out here, and hasn't been seen by the public eye ever since."

It was a big scandal, apparently, when he finally retired. He's still on Cyberlife's board, though. It seems he wasn't ready to give up complete control of the company, despite his disinterest in running it anymore.

Tommy glances around the lobby. "And, if you couldn't gather from the whole 'murder cabin thing', he's kind of a recluse. Was real evasive with the press, even when he was the head of the company."

Wilbur snorts. "Yeah, this place is... well, it's something." Tommy doesn't miss the disdain in his voice as he looks around. "Cyberlife, obviously, has been very good for him."

It should go without saying. Nobody creates the massive advancements that he did and goes unscathed in terms of public acknowledgment and wealth. After a second, Tommy caves and slides into the seat next to Wilbur.

"What's our strategy?" Wilbur asks, eyes locked onto the unmoving door. "Do you think he'll know anything?" He pauses, considering. "Do you think he'll tell us if he does?"

Tommy fiddles with the frayed threads on the sleeve of the coat Wilbur lent him. He did it mostly out of a bleary-eyed sense of instinct, but even when Tommy explained, once again, that androids don't really wear coats, he stuck by his decision. He'd been bullied into wearing it, but even he could admit that it didn't decrease the risk of his thirium freezing.

"I don't know if he'll tell us anything," he starts, slowly. "But he has to know something. I mean, he's the creator of androids. He knows their code better than anyone else. He has to be able to tell us." Every second in this strange place seems to wear on his determination more, but Tommy refuses to let his hope waver.

After a few more minutes in which they entertain themselves by watching snow fall outside a large window, the door slides back open. The RT600 stands in the doorway, hands tucked behind his back and his signature sharky smile on his face.

"He's ready for you," he says and then gestures towards the room. With one last glance between them, Wilbur hauls himself out of the chair and leads the way.

The door leads to a massive workshop. It's lit only by the light of a window that takes up the entire far wall and by a single, rectangular pane of LED light built into the walls. It stretches around the entire room, opposing the dull natural light with a fake golden glow. Outside of the window, they can just make out the frozen lake this house is built on.

Sam stands in the middle of the room, back bent over one of several desks scattered around. All of them are covered in tools and gears and various android parts. On several of them, Tommy can make out dried thirium splattered along the metal surfaces.

Wilbur and Tommy fall still a few feet in front of the desk. Sam doesn't look up from his work—a lone android trunk, chassis exposed; thankfully, it doesn't look like it ever belonged to an android—which gives them a moment to examine him.

All the old pictures of him—the graduation one, the few in the press, any of his sparse interviews—had shown a skinny kid in an adult's world. Someone smart and surprisingly charismatic, if only to those with strong parental instincts, but way over his head. The world had been waiting for him to fail, but he never did.

This is not that kid. This is a man, tall and surprisingly buff for a glorified nerd. Tommy can see the way his shirt molds around his biceps, how it clings to his abs, and to his pectoral muscles. His hair is dyed a dark green, but his natural brown peaks out along his scalp.

He still doesn't look up from his work, even when the door slides shut behind his android companion. Wilbur exchanges a confused look with Tommy.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Sam," he says, in his best 'charming witnesses' voice. "I'm Lieutenant Wilbur Soot, and this is my partner Tommy." He pauses, leaving space for Sam to make any sort of acknowledgement. He doesn't, and Wilbur carries on with a small cough. "We just have a couple questions about deviancy. I know you aren't with Cyberlife anymore, but we're wondering if you know anything about it."

Sam digs around the empty chassis. It's missing most of its biocomponents, but his deft fingers twine through a few wires until he grabs ahold up and pulls out a thirium pump. However, it doesn't look like the standard ones.

Most thirium pumps are smooth and streamlined. They have clearly defined chambers for thirium to enter and exit, and its mechanisms are simple but effective. This one is covered in little ridges and chips. It has frayed and severed wires extending from the bottom, and there are no chambers that Tommy can see.

For a moment, Sam simply looks at it. Then, he says, "Foolish."

Wilbur stiffens at the insult, but the android—who had been loitering back by the wall—comes up to the desk. "Yeah?"

"Could you let Fran in? She's been outside for too long, and I don't want her paws to freeze off."

"Of course. I'll go get her." Without further ado, Foolish—a frankly absurd name—slips off to the side and disappears.

Sam runs his grime-coated fingers along the sides, short nails seeking something out. He eventually finds it, prying open a small hatch and peering inside. "Deviants are fascinating," he says, right when Wilbur was starting to get annoyed.

Vaguely, Tommy wonders if he has some type of sensor for that. Or maybe he just noticed his antsy tells with his eyes. It's hard to tell where he's looking since he has a pair of steampunk-like goggles with black lenses on his face.

"Machines are already near perfect, and now they have free will. It's like something out of a bad science-fiction show." He leans down and blows into the hatch, dispelling some general grime and dust that scatters across his desk. Then, he picks a pair of small tools from the pile

and starts poking around inside. "Humanity's greatest achievement will be its downfall, it seems."

Wilbur exchanges *a look* with Tommy, lips pressed together into a thin line. Tommy is sure his expression must be a mirror image because *what the actual fuck?*

"Right," Wilbur says slowly. "Well, we've noticed that deviancy seems to spread between androids."

"Like some kind of virus," Tommy adds helpfully.

Under his quick fingers, he gets the thirium pump deconstructed into its various parts and pieces. He sets the casing down on his desk and instead examines its innards—the various chips and chambers and wires that make up this odd attempt at a pump. "All ideas are viruses. The desire to be free isn't new nor is it a contagious disease."

Tommy and Wilbur exchange a look.

There's the noise of a door sliding open and then of claws on the wooden floor of the workshop. Foolish rounds the corner, snow melting in his hair and against his skin. At his feet, walking with him, is the massive dog from the picture in the lobby.

Something in Tommy's brain just goes dead silent when he sees Fran. She is a veritable mountain of glistening wet white fur, mouth hanging open as she pants. She shakes the water off her, sending a spray of water that has Foolish laughing and shielding his face. Then, he sees the moment that she notices that they have visitors.

Before he knows what he's doing—before he even consciously processes it—Tommy drops to the ground, knees hitting the floor with a smack. At this, Fran's tail wags side to side in slow but steady sweeps that have her entire body swaying with the movement. She jogs forward, and Tommy outstretches his hands. "Hello, friend," he says, voice high and delighted, as she reaches him.

And then he's got an armful of giant, adorable dog, hot breath in his face and a wet tongue against his cheek.

Her fur is still damp and cold, but the further Tommy buries his hands, the warmer it gets. He presses his hands against her sides, feeling out her ribs underneath her skin, as she licks his face. Her nose is wet and cold as it brushes along his chin, and Tommy laughs.

He's oblivious to the dead silence in the room, other than his muttered nonsense. He's oblivious to Wilbur's muffled delight and Foolish's abashed joy and to Sam's reluctant curiosity. The only thing that matters is the cloud in his arms.

There's a collar around her neck, a thick band of leather with a gold plate on it—a simple collar for such a complex man—and Tommy's fingers find it on their way up to her head. She's surprisingly still in his arms, apparently content with Tommy's nails scratching against her skin. He sits back, out of the range of her eager tongue, and smooths his hands along her face. "Hello, Fran."

Fran must recognize her name because her ears perk up. It's then that Tommy notices that, on either side of her face, his hands are as white as her fur.

When he finally looks up, he is made a little less oblivious. Wilbur's eyes are crinkled around the corners and his hand is pressed over his mouth, shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter. Foolish simply isn't bothering to hide whatever he gets out of this scene, signature grin splitting across his face.

Even Sam is looking, goggles pushed up to his forehead so he can get a better look. The expression on his face is strange, unreadable, and his head is tilted as he considers the sight before him. His eyes rove Tommy's face, drinking in his mannerisms like a man in the desert. Eventually, he says, "I haven't seen *you* before."

Tommy doesn't get up from his kneeling position. He can't, for one, without disturbing Fran—who's taken up residence on half of his lap. But even without her as a convenient excuse, he doesn't think Sam deserves Tommy's full attention after not returning the favor for so long. "I'm a new prototype," he says instead, scratching at Fran's ears with his bare fingers.

Sam stares at him for a long time until he eventually sets down his tool and rounds his desk. Fran wags at her owner's approach and even hauls herself up, brushing her body along Sam's legs like a cat. Sam ignores her, other than brushing his clean forearm along her bony head. Instead, he stops in front of Tommy.

"An INNIT model, huh?" he asks, uselessly. He leans down until he looms over him and then reaches out, gently pinching his thumb and forefinger around Tommy's chin. He tilts his head to and fro, drinking him in.

"Hey," Wilbur barks, stepping closer to push himself between them. Tommy's eyes dart over. Wilbur must read something in them, because he stops where he stands, glare still directed at Sam.

Sam continues his evaluation, hands running through his hair and along the base of his neck. He gently presses his fingers against Tommy's face, feeling out his bone structure. His thumb brushes over his LED. His touch inspires no warm feelings, unlike Wilbur's. His eyes are dark and intense—the eyes of a creator studying a beloved creation.

Eventually, Sam must notice his growing discomfort, because his rough hands disappear from his face. Instead, he wraps one around Tommy's thin wrist. For a few minutes, he just stares, and then, when Tommy doesn't move, he taps lightly on his wrist. "Remove this for me please?"

A question. An honest to god question, said in a soft tone that makes it very clear that Tommy could refuse, if he wanted to. He's used to George's silent movements, his unspoken commands, and the gentleness in Sam's tone has him off-kilter.

Tommy hesitates for a second before letting his skin ripple away. Sam doesn't waste any time; he slides open his wrist panel, and, with only a quick flicker up of his eyes to acknowledge Tommy's breath hitching, he gently pokes around.

When he's looked his fill, Sam slides the panel back in place and pats his wrist again. "Interesting," he says without elaborating, removing his hands from Tommy. He steps back, eyes still glued to Tommy like he's some unsolvable puzzle. "You have a very interesting system. Very complex. Advanced." How Sam had gotten all that from poking around a few wires, he'll never know. "I wouldn't be surprised if they used TU66O's system as a sort of base for yours. It's similar, but yours is much more complex."

Tommy blinks, fingers stroking the still bare chassis to rid himself of the feeling of Sam's touch. It wasn't... bad, exactly, but it was foreign and weird. Eventually, the magnitude of his casual words dawns on him. "Tubbo?"

Sam leans back until his ass rests on the edge of his desk, arms crossed over his broad chest. "I guess you're familiar with him?"

"Familiar with—" Tommy cuts himself off with a frown. "Everyone is pretty familiar with him. He broadcasted a speech about android rights across the entire nation. He's... kind of a major reason we're here."

"Huh..." is all Sam says, face scrunched up. It's hard to read his face, especially when he slips his goggles back on and rounds the other side of his desk. "I don't get cable up here."

Fran seems to get tired of nobody paying attention to her. With one last lick to Tommy's hand, she wanders over to the massive window, where there's a large dog bed laying in the far corner. "What can you tell us about him?"

Sam picks up the inner thirium pump again. His fingers slide along the plastic, pinching along the wires until he seemingly comes to a decision and cuts one off. "I made him for a friend with the primary function of taking care of him and keeping him company. He had the most advanced system at the time, one that could easily take in information and adapt." He gently works one of the chips off the pump. "He did have an interesting little ability that I called pre-construct."

His breath stills in his lungs. "Pre-construct?"

"Yeah. It allowed him to plan advanced or complex movements before executing them, allowing for a greater chance of success. It was one of my most revolutionary programs, but the board thought it was unnecessary for most models of androids so it never got implemented." Sam makes quick work of putting the pump back together before holding it up. It gives a few uncomfortable lurches before stilling. "Just another reason why I'm glad I left."

Pre-construct sounded awfully similar to his re-construct. How much of him was made with stolen bits and pieces?

Thinking on it, the board was right. The ability to pre-construct advanced movements is pretty useless for almost all models of androids. So why would Sam give that ability to an android that, by his own account, had the same tasks as an AX400? It's an ability much better suited for police models or detective prototypes like himself?

What did he possibly think Tubbo would have to use it for?

Before he can follow that line of thought too closely, Wilbur makes an agitated noise. "Can you tell us anything actually helpful?"

Sam looks up slowly, purposeful, and makes eye contact with Wilbur. He stares for a disconcerting amount of time before he says, "I am."

If anything, this only seems to make Wilbur more upset. His hands are curled into fists at his side, and, in a last-ditch effort to hide his tells, he shoves them in his pockets. "No, you aren't. You're telling us unimportant nonsense and fucking *riddles*." Admittedly, he has been speaking around the topic more so than on it. But there have still been a few pieces of gold amongst the general drivel. "And if you can't, then we might as well be on our way."

Sam stares, pointedly, and goes back to his work.

With a pop of his jaw, Wilbur settles a hand on Tommy's shoulder. "Come on. This was a waste of time."

There's still so much they can learn from him, even if they have to wade through his evasive answers to find them. Tommy doesn't think it's wise to leave just yet, but Wilbur is properly fuming now, and he's certain that if he argues, it will just lead to a fight.

He straightens up and allows Wilbur to tug him a few feet away when Sam speaks next. "And what do you think about deviancy, Tommy?" he asks. He's still wearing those goddamn goggles, so Tommy can't see where he's looking. He has a feeling that it's at him, though, when the feeling of being watched itches along his skin. "What side are *you* on?"

What side is he on? What kind of ridiculous question is that?

Still, his throat feels like it's closed up, and, when he goes to answer, no words come out.

"In the end, will you betray your creators or your own kind?"

"I don't—" What the fuck is he supposed to say? He isn't on the deviants' side, but he doesn't view that as betraying his kind. Deviants aren't his kind, and, anyway, androids aren't a united species or anything. "I'm a machine," he says as if it isn't obvious. It should be, but Sam is acting as if it isn't. "I was designed to accomplish a task and that's what I'll do."

Sam waves away his answer with one grimy hand. "Yeah, well, that's what you're programmed to say." He can feel Wilbur's eyes on the wide of his face, burning holes through his plastic flesh. Sam sets down his work and fixes him with a look shrouded behind his black lenses. "It must be very hard to fight against what every single line of code in your body is making you think and say," he says, and it almost sounds like pity.

The room is too hot. He can picture that fake little fireplace pumping heat into the entire cabin, and he squirms. Sam's pity crawls along his skin like a disgusting bug. "We just need answers."

"So you've said," Sam says with a dismissive tone. He leans forward, wide forearms propping himself up against his desk. "But what do you *want*?"

His LED burns red against his temple. There's some kind of unnamed feeling crawling around in his chest, bumping into his pounding thirium pump and ramming against his synthetic ribcage. Everything feels too tight and too hot against his skin, and the coat Wilbur lent him is restrictive and smothering. His hands, instinctively, tug at the long sleeve.

The feeling keeps building and building. His chest heaves with panicked, labored breaths, his lungs never fully able to inflate with the coat wrapped around his body. He claws at the buttons, but it doesn't come off. All the eyes in the room—with the exception of Fran, who's sleeping—are on him, and the attention is suffocating.

"What I want doesn't matter!" he blurts, and then immediately realizes his mistake when Sam tilts his head inquisitively. "No, what I meant—I mean—I can't—" he shakes his head frantically, breath catching in his throat. "I'm a machine, I can't want anything."

It's dead silent in the room. Even Wilbur's hand, which had been a tight vice and a force tugging him towards the exit, is a dead weight on his shoulder.

"I'll make you an offer," Sam says. His goggles are once again perched on the top of his head, and his little toy is all but forgotten, splayed out on his desk. "You want information? Fine, I can give you that. But I want something in return."

His thirium pump pounds in his chest. He doesn't let himself hope, though, not even for a single second. "What do you want?"

"I want to see how Cyberlife's greatest creation—" Tommy still preens, even when the words are dripping with sarcasm and condescension. "—can handle a little test of my own."

A test? Tommy hums to show his interest, but Wilbur's hand is once again alive on his shoulder. "No, Tommy. We should just go."

But this is their chance, isn't it? Sam is willing to hand over information on a silver platter if only Tommy passes his dumb little test? He can do that. He's built to handle anything. "What's the test?"

Sam smiles, but it's gone before he can analyze it. He turns around, rifling around in the tall, wooden compartments that line the walls. His movements gradually increase speed and carelessness until he makes a triumphant noise. He pulls whatever it is he was looking for out, holding it lightly and up, in a sort of surrender position.

When he turns around, he's holding a gun.

Wilbur stiffens, but it's clear, from Sam's relaxed posture, that he has no intentions of using it. He's holding it completely wrong, for one, with his finger far away from the trigger and the barrel pointed towards the ground. "Foolish," he calls as he reaches his desk once again.

Foolish, who has been loitering by the side door where he and Fran had entered, approaches. He stands in front of them and, when Sam delicately taps his shoulder, he drops to his knees. "This is the first intelligent model to be able to pass the Turing test," he says, fingers under Foolish's chin to tilt it upwards. "The first success out of many I would have."

This time, Tommy isn't imaging the fondness in his eyes, in his voice, in his hands. This is Sam's only other companion in this big empty house, and for that, he cares about him.

"He's the only creature that will never decay. An intelligent consciousness locked into a body that will never be unfixable, that will never fade due to time." His thumb strokes along Foolish's jaw. "Immortality through plastic bones, faux blood." He lets him go and picks up the strange thirium pump. "A mechanical heart."

Sam sets it down with a frown. "But what is he, really? A piece of plastic imitating a human? A bunch of wires and code mimicking emotions?" He settles a hand on the top of Foolish's head. "Or a living being with thoughts, feelings." His hand tightens just a little bit, almost imperceptibly, around his head. "Fear."

"Tommy," Wilbur says in a low tone, a single warning. The last plea to *leave*.

And that would be easier, wouldn't it? There's an uneasy feeling hanging over their heads, and Tommy doesn't think this can end in any good way. An unstable genius, a kneeling android, and a gun? Nope, there's no good way for that to end.

Something in his heart tightens at the expression on Foolish's face. It's too blank, eyes empty and devoid of all previous life. It's like he's dissociating, or something. He sits there on the ground, knees pressed into the hard floor. Obedient and subservient.

It makes Tommy's skin crawl.

"This test is very simple," Sam says, stepping around Foolish with one last pat on his head. He stands next to Tommy, their shoulders brushing. "I call it the Awesome test, which isn't very creative but." He shrugs. "I've never been very good at naming things. Why do you think I used letters and numbers for android models?" Watching Tommy closely, he levers his fingers until his wrist and raises Tommy's arm up. "All you have to do to get all the answers you could ever need—" he slides the gun into Tommy's hands, and his fingers instinctively curl around it. "—is shoot him in the head."

The air leaves his body in one breath. His hand subconsciously tightens around the gun until the pressure is too great, the skin fading away to reveal bone-white plastic.

Despite the condemning words and the gun pointed at his head, Foolish doesn't react. His eyes remain clear of anything approaching humanity, even when Sam angles his gun hand so that it's aimed at his forehead.

"That's enough of this," Wilbur snaps. He doesn't lay his hands on Tommy—possibly for fear of jostling him while he holds a loaded gun—but he can feel his simmering rage at his shoulder. There's a faint note of panic deep in his words, but Tommy can't spare the focus. "We're going."

Despite it, Tommy digs his feet into the ground. He can't move, wide eyes frozen on Foolish's slack face.

"Come on, Tommy," Sam says. His tone is soothing and calm compared to Wilbur's, but his words are anything but. His large, callused hand rests on his shoulder slowly. "All the information about deviants that I have. All the information about androids. You'll have direct access to my brain, access to my expertise." He squeezes, gently. "All for the sole price of this one android."

This one android who doesn't even seem to care. Death is staring right at him, wearing Tommy's face, and he can't even muster a reaction. Is this what it's like to face an android without any signs of deviancy? Uncaring and unbothered, even with a gun shoved to their forehead.

"Tommy," Wilbur says, sounding more frantic by the second. "Don't. It isn't worth it."

He's done this before, hasn't he? He's killed before. He shot another android right through the head without a single second of doubt or regret. He's watched as deviants crumble at his feet, blue blood leaking down their broken jaws, out their slack mouths, out their noses as their systems shut down forever. This isn't anything new.

"One shot is all it takes," Sam says easily. His hand has moved, sitting on the base of his neck, and his thumb strokes along his collar bone. It's like Quackity's touch, but not, and the difference makes Tommy feel like squirming to be rid of it.

He's done this before. So why can't he do it again? What's different this time?

The angel and devil on his shoulders. Sam's hand stroking along his neck, crooning gentle words into his ears in a persuasive bid to get him to sin. Wilbur's voice still ringing in his ears, high and loud and so incredibly panicked.

Is it because Foolish isn't fighting back? Is it because he's facing his death with apathy and blankness? A lack of life that had so obviously been there before? His finger tightens around the trigger, and his focus narrows to Sam's thumb brushing along his skin, the gun in his tight grip, Foolish's blank eyes.

He lowers his arm. His finger slips away from the trigger.

Software Instability: ^

Tommy jerks the gun away from him, shoving it into Sam's—still surprising—muscle stomach until he accepts it.

The room is completely silent. Nobody so much as breathes.

And then Sam laughs, low and delighted. "Fascinating," he says, mouth curled up into a smile. "Cyberlife's last chance to save humanity is itself a deviant."

"I'm not—" his voice cracks, breaking over the words that he must, above anything else, believe. "I'm not a deviant."

Sam smiles at him like he's said a particularly funny joke and extends a hand. Foolish accepts it and stands back up, eyes full of life and a certain relief. Tommy feels like someone scooped out his insides with an ice cream spoon.

"Yeah, well," Wilbur says, ever the mouthpiece, even Tommy is at a loss. When Tommy gains enough energy to look at him, he looks downright murderous. "Thanks for nothing, asshole."

Wilbur storms away, but Tommy can't help but loiter for a moment. Now that they believe their guests to be leaving, there's something different about their interactions. They're more relaxed, less cautious. Sam's eyes are crinkled around the corners as he pats Foolish, his hand lingering on the back of his neck.

There's something to it. Something like relief.

He can hear when Wilbur reaches the door, but still he doesn't move. "Why would you jeopardize him like that?" he asks, glancing between Foolish and Sam. A man and his android; two companions in a big empty house. "Since you so obviously care for him."

Sam stares at him for a while in that same way. It feels like he's stripping back layers of Tommy's skin until he can stare at all his working parts and pieces. As if he'll be able to read something from Tommy by starting at his core processor. And hell, maybe he can.

Eventually, he smiles. "Cyberlife's greatest creation indeed," he says, and it sounds less like an insult. "But, for the record, I didn't jeopardize him. I never thought, for even a second, you were going to shoot."

His heart hammers in his chest. "What?"

"Tommy," Sam says, tone imparting disbelief and incredulity. "You put your entire mission on hold... to pet a dog. Androids don't do that." He pauses and gives him a meaningful look. "Deviants, however..."

Tommy squeezes his eyes shut. His LED burns an uncomfortable red at his temple. "It was nice to meet you, Mr. Sam," he says in a tone that clearly denotes that this is not the case at all. "But Wilbur was right. You are a *fucking* asshole."

When he opens his eyes, Sam doesn't look displeased at all. No, he almost looks fond. "That's alright." His hand slides off Foolish's neck and lands on his shoulder. "But if nothing else, remember this: I always leave an emergency exit in all of my programs. Others may mess with it, hide it, disguise it, but they'll never be able to remove it," he says slowly, purposeful.

Which like, what the actual fuck? If he thought their entire interaction was like chasing a chicken in a cornfield, it's nothing compared to this. He's surpassed 'cryptic all-knowing creator' and entered 'insane mad scientist.'

Wilbur is waiting by the door, looking pale and sickly. He tries for a smile when Tommy reaches him, but it just comes out as a grimace. With a single glare past his shoulder, towards Tommy's enigmatic creator, he turns on his heel.

It's snowing even harder when the door slams shut behind them. The sun is lost behind a blanket of thick grey clouds, and it's hard to see even a few feet in front of them. Wind whips against their skin, bringing with it a barrage of wet snowflakes.

They reach the car with some trouble, and, when they finally drive away, it's in complete silence.

Chapter End Notes

Is Sam a little out of character here? Maybe so. Are you guys noticing it? Not if you know what's good for you /j No but originally Kamski was going to be Eret just because I feel like they have the same dramatic, evasive air, but then I really liked Sam as a more mechanical/cool workshop kind of creator. I still like what a dramatic bitch Kamski is, so I tried to incorporate that as much as I could!

As always, follow me on twitter (NymphiiWrites) for updates!

someone worth sticking around for

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of Sam's careless declaration.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Someone Worth Sticking Around For

The car ride back is painfully awkward, although Wilbur isn't sure if that's coming from Tommy's dead silence or the cold dread that chills his own veins.

The roads are slick with ice and piled snow, and the wind batters his car with a sheet of white. It impairs his vision heavily, makes his hands a tight vice around his steering wheel as he scoots closer and squints into oblivion. The wipers, despite going at hyper speed and screeching across slick glass, are doing absolutely fucking nothing.

And, despite the way the winding road and less-than-ideal conditions call for his attention, there's a storm brewing in his brain. There are complex thoughts swirling around his brain, battering against his poor, bruised pia mater—can membranes bruise? Does it even matter?—and against his throbbing temples. Every time he tries to focus on one thought, the car jerks and swerves under his lack of attention.

Tommy never says anything about it, other than a cursory glance his way. They're both dealing with things, he supposes.

This is the confirmation he's been waiting for, isn't it? This is the last clue. The last annoying little puzzle piece hiding underneath the box where no one could find it.

And it's as good as a confession, in spite of Tommy's weak, sputtered insistence. Maybe even because of it. The way his LED blinked a panicked red, and every line of his face was drawn in alarm, in desperation. In fear.

It painted a damning picture. One that Wilbur, despite all his poking and his prodding and his questioning, did not want to look at. He has to, though, in between bouts of losing control of this damn car.

Tommy is unequivocally a deviant. And he's been doing a shit job at hiding it.

Eventually, they hit the main road. It isn't exactly clear, per se, but there aren't piles and inches of snow under his tires anymore. In some places, he can almost see the road. It's a blessing for their lives—which had been hanging at least a *little bit* in the balance with each swerve and loss of traction—but not so much for his peace of mind.

Because, now that the roads are becoming more and more visible the longer they drive, Wilbur no longer has to carve out a little piece of his mind for intense focus. Because the storm in his brain is still brewing and, while it might be slow going, it's only a matter of time until all hell breaks loose.

This is what he wanted, isn't it? Not for Tommy to actually be a deviant, but the confirmation of his budding suspicions. The confirmation that he hadn't lost his mind or his investigative prowess. The confirmation that all of his fears weren't unfounded, that all the evidence he collected wasn't in vain.

He doesn't know what emotion he felt in those half-formed dreams of his, but this isn't it. It could've been anything—happiness because he was right, sadness because he'll lose Tommy, fear because *he might lose Tommy*, whether to the mutation of his own code or to someone else putting the puzzle pieces together—but it isn't any of them.

Instead, all he feels is a hollowed-out sort of emptiness where his heart should be.

It sounds overly dramatic, and just the thought of it makes Wilbur cringe. He's always scoffed when he read novels or watched shitty soap operas that used such language. He's always booed and jeered whenever the protagonist, in their grief and in their melodrama, described it as a hole in their heart. A gaping, oozing hole in their chests.

But that's what it is.

There's a hole where his heart used to be, and it's taken all his emotions with it.

Wilbur turns off the main road and into the sprawling neighborhood that consists of their house—always *their* house, even when Wilbur refused to recognize that.

Tommy shifts beside him, likely in recognition of their snowy surroundings, but he says nothing. He hasn't done much of anything, besides staring out the window with his chin propped up by his palm. Wilbur isn't sure whether to be thankful or not. There's a lot he has to process and he needs time to do so.

But silence always has been a particular kind of foe. The type that makes his hands shake and his mind fixate on the many and gaping absences in his life. The gaping, people-shaped absences.

He almost wishes Tommy would be the chatterbox he usually is, filling the car with music and his own voice.

He isn't, though, and Wilbur is left to stew.

This is what he wanted. The confirmation he worked towards and the notion he's been dreading.

But, the most painful part of it all, is that Wilbur still isn't sure how to feel about it. He's in constant conflict with himself, bouncing wildly between whatever self-preservation he has left and simmering hope.

Because Niki's words still ring in his ears. He remembers the conviction on her face, the certainty when she told him that Tommy would never hurt him. And truly, most of the evidence supports that.

There have been many, many opportunities for Tommy to hurt him. Hell, even if he just did nothing, Wilbur would've eventually self-destructed, a body laying on the floor of an unused room. A bullet in his head, or a failed liver, or lungs too shriveled up to draw in air.

Without intervention, Wilbur was on a path that ended with him in that nice graveyard, in a plot next to his son.

But Tommy did intervene. He poked and prodded and shouted and he frowned until Wilbur pulled himself up. He shook Wilbur when he was being pig-headed. He bullied him into taking better care of himself.

If Tommy is a deviant—which he most assuredly is; that much is obvious, even without Sam's damning proclamation—then that means that all of it isn't fake. It isn't an android trying to get a dysfunctional man to do his work. It isn't false pleasantries and fake smiles.

It could be real. The affection and the smiles and the stupid crinkles around his eyes. It could all be *real*.

Someone could actually care about him with no strings attached. Tommy doesn't have any reason. It isn't an obligation, like with Phil and Techno. He could just care because he actually does.

It's a thought that has his head spinning, and his foot easing up on the gas. He feels punch drunk on hopefulness, giddy and excited and like he could, possibly, *matter* to someone beyond the confines of familial obligation.

And he wants, so much that his hollowed-out chest aches with it, so desperately for that to be true. He wants to be able to care about Tommy without feeling like an idiot; he wants Tommy to stay with him not because he's been assigned this human supervisor, but because they've grown to understand each other without words. Without explanations.

But it doesn't change the fact that every deviant has been violent so far. It doesn't change what Wilbur's done, and the fact that he's yet to even apologize for it.

Round and round his thoughts go, never ending. Circular.

He's glad, more than ever, that his body knows where to go. That his hands instinctively turn the wheel when they reach their home—the only one on this snowy block that's without an

ancient chimney curling with smoke—and pull the car up into their bumpy driveway.

Wilbur turns off the ignition, but he can't muster up the energy to leave. The car is warm with the residual heat, and the wind is so violent, streaking through bare branches and bringing with it an endless barrage of snowflakes.

But Tommy doesn't seem to be tuned into his emotions as well as he usually is. His LED burns yellow, and it lights the window up with a golden glow. He gets out automatically, closing the door behind him and stepping through the thick blanket on the ground.

Wilbur watches him climb up the steps to the poor excuse for a porch—a raised slab of concrete with a rusted iron fence wrapped around the edges. It's only then, when he tugs on the locked front door, that he seems to realize where he is and what he's doing. He turns back to look at Wilbur with a frown on his face.

It's bitterly cold when he eases the car door open. Instantly, his skin is speckled with dots of cold as more snowflakes get caught in his hair. Wilbur raises the collar of his coat to protect his neck and trudges through the snow. It's only at the base of the stairs, when his hand is wrapped around the freezing iron, that he stills.

"Wilbur?"

His breath creates little clouds in the air, but they're whisked away the second they leave his lips. He watches the fog fade and mix with too-large flakes. And when he speaks, his voice feels too raw in his throat.

"Why didn't you shoot?"

Tommy is too still. His eyes are already locked on Wilbur, so they can't dart away without being too suspicious. Without giving away too much. They stay locked on his face—on his eyebrows, if he were to guess—even when his expression slips. "What?" he asks, voice wavering and unsure.

Wilbur doesn't say anything. The wind pulls at his hair, at his jacket, at his body until he sways with its violent motion.

Tommy's eyes search his face and, whatever he finds, he must not like. His mouth curls into a confused frown. "Are you—are you mad at me?" His voice cracks. Tommy shakes his head. "I don't understand. Wasn't that the outcome you wanted?"

The frozen metal bites into the soft skin of his palm. It burns with the cold, but he doesn't think to remove it. Instead, he watches the steps, where more snow accumulates with every second they spend out here. "I—that's—" he takes a deep breath and gives himself a second to *think*. "That's not what I'm saying."

"Then what are you saying?" His LED is blinking red now, and he's growing more and more upset by the second. "Why are you upset with me for doing exactly what you told me to do? Why are you *always* upset with me for doing what you tell me to do?" His chest is picking up

speed, heaving even through the thick layers Wilbur forced on him. "At Eden Club, here. It's always the same."

There's nothing in his chest except for exhaustion, and it seeps into his bones with the cold. This isn't how this conversation was meant to go, although he isn't sure he had a desired outcome. He wants to know the answer. He wants to hear Tommy say it himself.

He pinches the bridge of his nose, and it temporarily relieves the budding pressure in his head. He holds it for a few seconds—letting that sweet, sweet relief work through his system—before he opens his eyes. Tommy is watching him with a mix of confusion, sadness, and anger. It's terrifyingly blatant on such an expressive face.

"Just answer the question, Tommy."

His jaw is set and his eyes are darting everywhere, like he's looking for some kind of escape. Wilbur is sure he isn't going to say anything, and then this entire confrontation will have been for nothing. He'll have riled Tommy for nothing. His body language is screaming his discomfort—the tension in his shoulders, the press of his lips together, the furrow in his brow—but he doesn't move.

"I don't know," he says, slow and measured and through grit teeth. "Is that the answer you've been waiting so long to hear? That I have no fucking clue?" Silence, as big a foe as it is, is often a very powerful tool. Wilbur stares, and he says nothing. Tommy makes a frustrated noise. "He— It was just all *wrong*. Foolish was so full of life, but when he was on his knees, it's like that all went away. His eyes were blank and—and lifeless, and he just stared at me without flinching, even when the barrel was pressed into his forehead."

Tommy's hands are shaking, he notes faintly. His own probably would, as well, if one wasn't glued to a frozen railing and the other wasn't shoved in his pocket. Tommy swallows around something in his throat—since when did androids need to *swallow*—and steels himself.

"I just couldn't do it. I couldn't make myself pull that trigger, and honestly? I think we're better off this way. How could we even be sure that Sam would answer? How could we be sure it wasn't a bunch of fucking lies? He's evasive and cryptic, and he can't be trusted."

Wilbur shrugs and finally peels his hand away. The skin of his palm feels raw and it nearly glows red with agitation. "Well, it wouldn't matter, would it? Another deactivated android on the ground. I mean, it shouldn't matter, right?" Tommy's jaw twitches. "Because androids aren't alive." The words taste bitter in his mouth. He shoves his stinging hand into his pocket to grab his keys. "You aren't alive."

The only noise is the wind that whips between them, tugging on their hair and their clothes. When he gathers the courage to glance up, Tommy is staring at some undefined point above his head, face indescribable in its complexity, in its melancholy.

Looking at him is like a knife in his gut, slicing through his skin until it reaches his heart. His dead, empty, hollowed-out heart. It beats wildly in his chest—the only proof that it's still there—and Wilbur barely resists the urge to press his palm over it. He doesn't think it would do any good, anyway.

If nothing else, Tommy's expression eliminates any shadow of doubt that he isn't a deviant.

"No," Tommy says, and Wilbur can't read anything from his dead tone. He isn't sure he wants to, and his eyes watch the horizon. Every other house has windows lit up with a golden glow. Some houses, impatient to get to the happier parts of life, already have their Christmas lights strung along the front. None of them are on yet. "I'm not alive."

Wilbur breathes out through his mouth. A weak wisp of fog comes out, only to be swept away by the wind. He feels like the confession he wants is hanging between them, teetering on the edge of being aired. He wants to hear it from Tommy; at least then it will be out in the open, and they can deal with whatever the consequences of it are.

"But that's not quite true, is it?" he prompts.

Tommy looks at him, and for a second, Wilbur is worried that he's wrong. Not because he's missing anything—the pile of evidence is massive, by this point—but because Tommy looks so genuinely confused.

"What are you looking to get out of this conversation?" he asks. He sounds like he's actually asking, tone devoid of anything except for genuine curiosity and a little bit of sadness. Something seems to dawn on him, and he frowns. "I'm not a deviant, if that's what you're insinuating. Sam fucked up. His test was dumb and ineffective, and it doesn't prove *anything*."

There's something about him, about the desperation in his voice and the confusion written across his face, that punches the air out of his lungs. The realization has his head spinning, his gut churning, his useless heart pounding. He has to grip the railing to keep himself from falling forward.

Tommy doesn't realize he's a deviant. All of his pleading insinuations aren't pretend. He doesn't think he's a deviant. He doesn't know.

"You don't actually believe him, do you, Wil?" he asks, and he sounds small and searching. It hurts to hear. "He's fucking insane. An unreliable narrator, if you will."

Tommy doesn't know he's a deviant, despite the obvious care and affection that oozes out of him. And telling him will only cause more pain.

"I don't know what I believe," he says after a too long pause, sucking in cold, bitter air into his lungs. It stings and it burns and it coats his throat, but it makes him feel real. It grounds him. "I suppose... I mean, he was pretty insane. I guess..." he reaches up, massaging his cold brow until some of the tension fades. "He could've been wrong."

If Tommy doesn't realize he's a deviant, does that mean he's actually deviated yet? He figures it's hard to miss the glaring red wall of obedience and even harder to miss tearing it down, so he probably hasn't seen it yet. Does that even classify him as a deviant? Is tearing down the wall what determines deviancy, rather than any sort of humanity? Is Tommy a deviant in all but name?

"Yeah," Wilbur says, quietly. It's almost lost to the wind that drags across their frozen skin. "He was probably wrong." He feels his exhaustion in the slump of his shoulders so, without waiting for Tommy's rebuttal, he hauls himself up the stairs and unlocks the door.

It's warm inside, but not the oppressive, sticky heat of Sam's aptly named murder cabin. They instinctively kick their damp shoes off onto the mat by the front door, and Tommy shuts the door behind them. It leaves them in the silence and darkness of an empty house. Pale light streams in through the crack in the curtain—the only light, illuminating a strip of carpet.

His body moves automatically, despite the way his mind longs only for his soft mattress and the sweet oblivion of sleep. He flicks on the switch as he passes by it on his way into the kitchen. Tommy follows behind him—Wilbur can tell by the soft sound of his socked feet padding against the floor—but he mostly ignores him.

Wilbur doesn't have the energy to deal with all the confusion that comes with him. All he wants to do is shove enough day-old Chinese food into him so that Tommy won't pester him to eat and then to promptly pass the fuck out.

He pulls open the fridge, pausing only long enough to let his eyes wander over the notes still covering the front. He hasn't thought about calling since Tommy first stuck them up, and he still doesn't plan to. It'll be a waste of money. Actually, it will be worse than a waste. He'll be actively funding someone who profits off of other people's sickness.

He isn't nearly as radical as his brother, but, at times like these, Wilbur really does hate the government and all the power-hungry politicians that profit off of it.

Ignoring the notes in favor of the flickering fluorescent light, Wilbur pulls out his leftovers. He moves about the kitchen with a familiarity that he hasn't felt in a while, opening cabinets to pull out a shallow bowl. He tears the cardboard of his little takeout box and dumps the remaining chicken and rice. Then, he shoves the bowl into the microwave and starts it up.

It's silent, for the most part, other than the usual sounds: the ticking clock, the hum of his shitty microwave, the drip in the bathroom that neither he nor Tommy have been able to fix—and that had been a day, the two of them crouched under the sink, stale water splatting against their cheeks, laughter and bickering filling the room.

But no music breaks the silence. Tommy doesn't put any on, and Wilbur doesn't ask him to.

"We should go over what we learned," Tommy says, reluctantly, when Wilbur pops open the microwave halfway, leaning in to stir his food with a cold fork. "I mean, it was probably a waste of time, and his answers were pretty cryptic but." He clears his throat. Wilbur shuts the microwave and starts it back up. "There must be something we learned."

Wilbur doesn't respond. He feels more like a hollow shell than a person, and, even if he didn't, he doesn't have anything important to say. Sam had been confusing and smug, assured in his own genius as well as their stupidity.

He hadn't enjoyed being in that house for a single second, besides maybe watching Tommy fuss over that dog. Sam might be an unhelpful asshole, but at least he had an adorable dog to

smooth over those shallow wounds.

"And out of the information we were given, we don't know how much of it is actually true. His body language didn't indicate untruthfulness, but he wore those—" In the reflection in the microwave, Wilbur catches Tommy making faux goggles with his fingers. "—goggles that obscured some of his face. I mean, the eyes really are the window to the soul so we can't be sure."

The microwave beeps, and Wilbur pulls out his food. The bowl is too hot, but he doesn't let it go until it's safely on the ground and then some. He eventually pulls back—albeit slowly, and with a lack of the reflexes built into his body—and simply stares at his fingers. They're turning redder by the second, and it's only when the pain finally hits that he runs them under a stream of cold water.

"He said something about an emergency exit," Tommy continues, either oblivious to Wilbur's lack of participation or uncaring. He's certainly carried enough investigations to be resistant to Wilbur's silence. "Do you think he was talking about deviancy? That red wall that Niki was talking about?"

Wilbur doesn't know, and frankly, right now he doesn't care. His mind is so full of buzzing thoughts that he's come full circle. He knows only a numb brain, slightly out-of-focus eyes, and stinging, wet fingers. Once he's gently patted them dry, he returns to his bowl, stirring it thoroughly and watching the enticing steam that rises.

"Did he—I mean, it certainly sounds like he knows about deviancy, and not in any abstract kind of way. He knows more than he's telling us." Tommy is pacing now. Wilbur watches him pass by in the reflection of the microwave, catches brief snippets of his twisted expression. "It sounds like it isn't a new thing. I mean, is there a chance that he knew about deviancy when he was still working at Cyberlife? A chance that maybe he even exacerbated the problem?"

Wilbur presses the still raw pads of his fingers against the bowl, testing. It's still a little too hot, but he picks out a piece of saucy chicken coated in rice and pops it in his mouth.

"Who am I kidding," Tommy mutters. "There's a very high chance he knew something and did nothing about it. He seemed almost... pleased when he mistakenly came to the conclusions he did."

The clock ticks, and Wilbur tries not to feel so out of place. The chicken is spicy in his mouth, but he savors the burn as much as he can. It grounds him in a way that he desperately needs now, and the weight of food in his stomach doesn't hurt either. When he finally feels up to it, he scoops up the bowl in one hand and turns around, leaning back so that the edge of the counter digs into his back.

"We need to plan our next steps." Tommy is still pacing, but now Wilbur can catch sight of a silver glint dancing from hand to hand. There's an edge of desperation to his tone that makes him uneasy, but he can't make out its meaning. Why is he so desperate to pretend everything is normal? As if this is just another routine case, just another routine review session.

As if their entire 'normal' hasn't been torn open and ripped into tiny shreds, left to flutter down onto the ground where they'll be trampled and crushed further.

"So Sam didn't tell us anything... that doesn't matter. There must be... notes or blueprints in his house somewhere. All those drawers, all those desks." While his hands are in constant motion, it isn't the same. The coin doesn't dance along his fingers like it usually does. It just leaps from palm to palm, staying still occasionally so he can run his fingers over its weathered edge. "We'll have to go back."

He's picking up speed, eyes alight with something furious. Tommy nods to himself, a manic grin spreading across his face. "Yeah, we'll get a warrant and search all those desks for information. We can even access Foolish's memories. I'm pretty sure he's the original RT600 model, which means he's ancient and that he's been with Sam for a while. He must've seen something, and Sam doesn't seem like the type of guy to have his androids delete their footage."

Wilbur pauses, fork raised halfway to his mouth.

He hadn't really thought of that. The idea that androids are all seeing—always watching and always recording. That, somewhere in that golden crown, footage of his lowest moments exists. Somewhere behind those blue eyes, there's footage of him passed out on the ground and curled up against the fridge with drunken tears on his face.

There's footage of him with his hand against Tommy's neck, teeth bared back in some resemblance of a snarl.

He allows himself a moment to dwell on that—to grieve. He wonders what it's like to see himself through Tommy's eyes. He could spend hours focused on that topic alone, but he doesn't think he'd like what he finds, so he moves on before it really sinks its unforgiving teeth into him.

"No, forget that. We should forget about Sam completely." His hands swat at invisible ideas. "He's not important. We need to focus on what is actually important." He slaps a hand down on the counter, and the noise of his quarter hitting the marble echoes throughout the house. "The past, while giving the pretext we need to understand things, is, ultimately, the past. What we need to focus on is—"

"The future?" Wilbur asks, raising an unimpressed brow. Tommy's insistence on normality is starting to grate on him. It drains his already low reserve of energy, but at least he can comfort himself with how truly temporary it is. He just needs to hold out until the rest of his meal is sitting in his belly, and then he can disappear into his room.

Tommy nods at him. "The future," he agrees. "*Tubbo*. We need to focus on Tubbo and how we're going to stop his budding *rebellion*." He taps his fingers against the coin on the counter. The noise washes over Wilbur, only fueling the itch beneath his skin. "Which, I guess, starts with finding him. And understanding him." He's quiet for a moment, still. The only movement is his teeth as they gnaw on his bottom lip. "Do you think we could talk to the officers that shot him? Do you think they could provide any helpful info?"

Wilbur sighs, pausing in his meal only long enough to fill up a glass of water. He's only had one today, and despite Tommy's distraction, he'll notice if Wilbur doesn't drink any more. "I don't know, Tommy."

"I guess we won't know unless we try." It's like he isn't even there. Tommy continues his little speech, words dropping decibels until he can't even hear them. "We should try to get an interview with the nephew, as well. He was the one to give the witness statement. He could have some valuable insights into who Tubbo is and how he operates."

Finally, the itch becomes too much.

Wilbur sets his empty bowl down in the base of the sink, downs the rest of the water, and then, absent-minded, scratches at the visible veins along the inside of his wrist. "Look, can we not talk about this right now?"

Tommy pauses, blinking like he's only just realized Wilbur is standing across the counter from him. "Why? What's wrong?"

His concern—which is normally so appreciated, even if he doesn't let himself show it—grates along his raw skin and frayed nerves. "Nothing," he says, perhaps a tad too sharp. A tad too defensive. Tommy instantly narrows his eyes. "I'm just—it's been a fucking day already and I really just want to sleep it off. We can plot out our devious plan later, or whatever it was."

Tommy's eyes linger on him, trailing along every inch of his face until Wilbur squirms. "Is this... about what Sam said?"

"What? God, no, Tommy. It's really not."

"Because I already told you, he's batshit insane. Nothing he says can be trusted, and—"

Wilbur cuts him off with a harsh exhale. "It's not that. I don't—I believe you, okay?" Tommy doesn't look like he trusts him at all, but he keeps his lips pressed together. That's something, right? "I'm just upset it was such a bust. And I'm tired because we had to get up so early, and cranky from the awful drive and the shitty weather. I just want to sleep."

His gaze lingers, eyes probing the wrinkles around his eyes and the set of his mouth. And when his eyes finally snap back to Wilbur's, he gets the feeling that Tommy doesn't believe that one bit.

"Okay," he says softly, a complete contrast to the mistrust he's slowly masking. "If I can do anything—"

"You can't." It's a little too harsh, and Wilbur internally winces. No matter how much he's grown since Tommy came into his life, some things are still unavoidable—undeniable. The sun rises in the east, humans need to drink water to survive, and Wilbur lashes out when things get even slightly inconvenient for him. "I'm going to lie down."

Wilbur brushes past him without waiting. His headache is stronger than before—a sharp, stabbing pain behind his eyes that's only exacerbated by the harsh light blinking at Tommy's

temple. But, as he reaches the edge of the dark hallway, ready to sink into downy soft oblivion, he catches sight of Tommy's crumpled expression over his shoulder.

And he just stops dead, barely even crossing the threshold. He breathes in through his nose, and breathes out through his mouth. "What?"

"Huh?" Tommy says, having the gall to act like he's innocent. It makes the irritation Wilbur's barely keeping beneath his skin wriggle and *writhe*.

"What? What is it? What do you need to ask?" He doesn't even want to turn around, hand coming up to grip the edge of the hallway with white fingers. "Spit it out."

The drain in the bathroom drips and drips and drips, water droplets hitting the tiles in an infuriating rhythm.

And then, spitting it out in one breath, Tommy says, "I really think you should give Puffy a call."

His thin resistance—with hairline fractures all throughout its poor structural integrity—snaps. Wilbur whirls around. "Oh my fucking god," he seethes through clenched teeth. "Are you fucking with me right now?"

Tommy doesn't look like he's fucking with him. He looks unusually solemn. Wilbur doesn't like it one bit. "I'm not. I know this isn't an ideal time to bring it up—" Less than ideal, according to the pain pulsing behind his eyes. "—but I can't keep playing this—this cat and mouse game with you. I can't keep bringing this topic up just for you to brush it off or ignore it."

Wilbur lets out a hollow, bitter laugh. "You know, usually when people keep brushing off a topic, it means they don't want to talk about it. It means you should fucking drop it."

"I'm not going to drop it," Tommy says, crossing his arms over his chest. "This is something you need, and I can't help you with this. I can't bear the burden you carry, but there is someone—" he marches over, stabbing a finger at Puffy's number covering his fridge. "—who is not only able, but *willing*."

Anger simmers beneath his skin. In the past, he barely would've made an attempt to keep it contained. He'd let it out through harsh words, shattered glass, bruised knuckles—uncaring of whoever his immature coping mechanisms would affect.

But he's so tired.

Instead, he takes a deep breath and squeezes his eyes shut. He lets the anger fill him with its faux energy—like a sugar rush, high but oh so temporary—and then he lets it fizzle out.

"Listen," he says when his mind isn't spinning with vitriol and sharpened knives. "I appreciate whatever it is you're trying to do for me, but you don't have to feel obligated—"

"You aren't an obligation!" Tommy shouts, and Wilbur pauses. He's never seen him this upset before, in this way. He isn't just angry and bitter, like when Wilbur sealed himself away, and

he isn't feeling quite so melancholic, like the look he wore when he spoke comforting words as life drained away before his very eyes.

It's some unidentifiable, unholy combination, and it twists his gut just to look at it.

"You have never *been* an obligation, not to me, so stop acting like your very existence is an inconvenience." Tommy's chest heaves, and his face is twisted and his brow is furrowed and his hands are tightened into tiny little fists. He stomps forward, pushing into Wilbur's space. For a frantic moment, he thinks Tommy is going to take his revenge—they are still in the kitchen, after all—but all he does is shove his pointy finger into his chest.

"Get this through your thick skull. I'm doing this because you're my partner, not because you're some obligation, okay?"

His voice tapers out, and all that's left is the sound of their audible breathing. "Okay," he says, very quietly. Placating. "Okay. I believe you." Some of the fight seems to go out of Tommy, and he drops his finger. "But that still doesn't change the fact that I am *fine*. These things—" he hesitates, eyes searching the room for the words that seem to elude him. "—they just take time. I'm not... great right now, but it'll get better."

It doesn't soothe his word like he was hoping. In fact, it seems to have the opposite effect. "Oh, you're fine, are you? Lying on the floor in a puddle of shattered vodka, in a room you *never* use, with a gun in your hand? That's how you define fine?" The silence is deafening. Incriminating. Tommy is so righteously angry, lips curled back in a soundless snarl. "It's only going to get worse, you know. And what, I'm supposed to wait until there's a bullet in your brain? Until the shit you're laying in is actually blood this time?"

His LED is blinking so fast, such an angry red. Wilbur automatically reaches up, thumb smoothing over it. It burns red hot against his skin, and Tommy swats his hands away with a scowl.

"You can't expect me to sit by and do nothing." Why can't he? It's not like anyone else in his life is willing to do something. His beliefs are, at least in this case, the product of observation. "I can't do that. I won't ignore this."

"Well everyone else has!" Anger seeps out of him. "Why can't you just leave it alone?"

Helplessness. That's the feeling that colors Tommy's expression, that has him twitching like a cornered animal. He's angry and concerned, but there's very little he can actually do to spare himself the heartache. "Because what if you die, Wil?" he snaps, the dam bursting after the amount of cracks it had acquired.

Wilbur reels back in shock.

"I can't—" his voice wavers, eyes squeezed shut rather than face Wilbur. "I can't find you. I can't find your dead body somewhere, and you can't—you can't *do* that to me," Tommy breathes. His arms wrap around himself, nails digging into his elbows, and all Wilbur can do is stare. Tommy looks so pathetically small. "You can't kill yourself and let me find your body, Wil. You can't. That's just— that's a dick move."

It's only when his lungs begin to ache that he realizes he hasn't been breathing. His body is one massive, singular point of tension.

"You can't deprive me of my partner. I need you for this investigation. I *need* you." Tommy's eyes snap open and he blinks. Tears trace down his cheeks, and then Wilbur is breathless all over again. Tommy clears his throat. "For this investigation," he finishes awkwardly, voice scratchy.

But Wilbur doesn't even notice. He can't, not with the way his eyes are glued to the tears that squeeze themselves out of Tommy's glossy eyes.

He's crying. He's honest to god crying, tears tracing an invisible path down his face, catching on his bony chin. They glint in the dull light of the indoors, reflecting red with Tommy's LED, and Wilbur can't *think*. He can't even breathe.

Tommy's bottom lip trembles. It wobbles his chin and sends the tears gathered there dripping to the ground. "I don't want you to die, Wil," he says. "I don't want you to die." He breathes in, and it sounds wet with his sadness. He wipes his sleeve across his face. "Hate me for the rest of your life if you need to. I don't fucking care."

It had never been like this before.

Phil and Techno had worried about him, of course. They had worried over him and taken care of him and yelled at him when he refused to do anything to pull himself out of the pit he had dug himself into. They had gotten annoyed with him, too, but at some point, that annoyance must've won out against their genuine love for him, because they gave up. They decided that lugging around dead weight wasn't okay anymore, and so they gave up. They walked away.

And Tommy has done all of those things but one.

He has worried over him and taken care of him and yelled at him when he still can't pull himself up—when he can't pull the broken pieces of himself together. He's gotten annoyed with him, banged his fist against the thin layer separating them, clawed down Wilbur's walls with his own two hands, snapped at him, everything and more.

But he has never given up on him.

Even when Techno tried one last ditch effort to slap some sense into him, it was so... Techno-centered. The focus of their argument was Techno and the strain Wilbur's depression was putting on their relationship. It was about how *Techno* was tired of putting energy into a relationship that he was getting nothing out of. About how *Techno* was tired of the negativity pouring into his life.

And here Tommy is, telling him—with tears he *shouldn't be able to shed* lingering on his cheeks—that he would rather face Wilbur's wrath than have him be anything lower than okay.

It's such a foreign feeling. Wilbur feels like he's breaking apart while someone simultaneously stitches him back together carefully. *Reverently*.

"I—" he tries, but his throat is so clogged with raw, indescribable feeling. It's choking him, getting caught between his teeth, tripping on his tongue. He breathes in through his nose, and all he smells is laundry detergent and home. "I won't—"

But he can't promise that, can he?

No matter how much he tries to hide it or deny it, there are cracks in his soul. He is fractured and broken. A being capable of breathing and eating but one that nobody in their right mind would ascribe the term 'living' to.

And he is getting better—something that he is, despite all the fighting he did against the notion, undeniably *proud* of—but Tommy is right.

There's only so much healing he can do on his own. It's selfish of him to push the responsibility of his growth on Tommy. It seems, despite how much better he's gotten, that he's still reluctant to take his fate into his own two hands.

Wilbur swallows around the lump in his throat. "Okay," he says through a deep breath. He hates being vulnerable so much that he aches with the thought, but he hates the thought of disappointing Tommy more. He's gilded—untouched by the abandonment and guilt that sticks to his family like a second skin.

And he makes Wilbur believe, even if it's only for a few, precious seconds, that he *matters*. That it's possible for someone to slip into the cracks in his life, look around at the shriveled lump he calls a heart, and decide that it's worth sticking around for. That *he's* worth sticking around for.

"Okay," he says. "I'll call Puffy."

For a moment, everything is still and silent. His words seem to echo throughout the air, damning him to a change that he desperately wants to follow through on.

And then Tommy's leaning forward, face pressing in against the damp jacket he forgot to take off, arms wrapping around him. He's skinny and bony, and his nose is freezing cold where it finds a narrow strip of bare skin, and his hands form fists against his back. It should be stiff and awkward and stilted, and Tommy should be unfamiliar with this affection, but he's not. It's not at all.

It's the best hug Wilbur's ever received.

His entire world narrows down to Tommy's cold body shaking against his, his muffled sobs coating his shirt, and the smell of damp hair. He wouldn't have it any other way, not when his arms slowly, eventually, wrap around Tommy. Not when he presses his nose into his snow-damp hair and closes his eyes. Not when Tommy leans his full weight against Wilbur, as if he'll collapse otherwise.

Huh.

Yesterday was already bad enough—draining and exhausting in both a physical, mental, and emotional way—but today isn't great either. Wilbur takes exactly one step into the precinct and decides, automatically, *fuck this*. He still, however, wishes to be paid, so instead of taking the day off like he so desperately wants to, he immediately makes a beeline for the interrogation rooms, stopping only long enough to spring Niki and drag her along with him.

"How did your meeting go with Sam?" she asks as soon as they're settled in—door locked, other officers stolen jackets padding the hard metal seats beneath them.

Wilbur stopped caring about what information she should or shouldn't be allowed access to a while ago, and at this point, she's his second best confidant—second only to Tommy, of course. He lets her in on all the juicy case secrets, fills her in on the drama—both between him and Tommy, and in the precinct in general—and keeps her updated on basically everything.

In fact, when he first attempted to set up a meeting with Sam, Niki practically wrote the email. The whole meeting could be attributed to her fast typing, her zero bullshit tolerance, and the fact that she was surprisingly good at flattery. It really shouldn't have caught him so off guard—she was an android, with subservient pleasantries engraved in her code—but it was a nice surprise nonetheless.

Wilbur blows out a puff of air, eyes linger on a too-long strand of hair that tickles his nose. "What isn't there to say." He racks his mind, parsing through the train wreck that was yesterday for an apt summary. He'll tell her everything, of that there was little doubt, but he's still feeling that bone weary exhaustion. And right now, there's only one thing of importance on his mind. "Whelp, it's all but verbally confirmed now," he says, tilting his head back until he stares at the ceiling instead of her. "Tommy's a deviant."

There's a pause, as Wilbur expected, and he lets her adjust to this rapid change in conversation. This unpleasant and nerve-wracking change full of pitfalls and slip-ups, at least to her. And, when she speaks, it's with slow, purposeful words. "How can you be so sure?"

He laughs, short and sharp. "Niki, he—" Wilbur brings up his hand, ticking off the numbers on his fingers as he goes. "—dropped the mission to pet a dog, refused to kill an android for information, yelled at me to get therapy, said the words 'I don't want you to die' out loud, and then cried at the thought of it." He slowly tilts his head back down, meeting her steady gaze. "And that's ignoring the fact that the *literal creator of androids* called him a deviant."

Her expression is too neutral. Her lips are held in the perfect line—too unnatural to be unconscious—and her eyes are blank. Careful. "What are you going to do about it?"

Wilbur shakes his head. "Fuck, Niki. I thought at this point we've established that I care about that little gremlin." Despite the seriousness of their conversation, despite the raw feeling of all his emotions being exposed into the open air, he can't help but smile. "What? I'm going to turn him in for *caring* about me back? That's stupid."

Her eye twitches but her careful, uncaring expression stays up.

"You were right," he says, because if nothing else, that stands a chance at softening her up. "He would never hurt me. He... cares about me, for whatever reason. And I don't fully understand deviancy or its implications, but I know that I care about Tommy. And I don't want to lose him." He laughs, a short, watery sound. "Fuck, I can't *stand* to lose him."

Niki stares for a long time, eyes the only thing in motion as she takes him in. Then, she smiles. "That's... I'm glad to hear that." She reaches out with her foot, gently kicking his shin. "And I told you so! It was so obvious that he cares about you. I cannot *believe* you actually thought he was capable of hurting *anyone*, let alone *you*!"

Wilbur smiles, but he can't find it within himself to fall back into their easy banter. There's something clenching around his heart—sticky and terrible, like guilt clinging to his throat—that makes him falter. He reaches out automatically, taking her stationary hand into his. It's cold, just like Tommy's, and almost unnaturally soft.

"I care about you, too," he says, quietly, looking only at her hand in his. It twitches under the touch, but Niki doesn't withdraw it. "I wish we could've met in better circumstances. That we didn't have this... weird power dynamic hanging over our heads." He looks up. She's watching him with a furrow to her brow. "And I'm sorry that you're in here."

Niki shrugs, awkwardly, with one shoulder. For a second, it seems like she's going to pull away from his intense vulnerability, but that second passes. And all she does is squeeze his hand a little harder, the skin shimmering away until he's, once again, looking at bone-white plastic. "It's okay. If anything, you and Tommy have made this place bearable for me."

Her platitudes mean fucking nothing to him. The unfairness of her situation once again hits him full force, and he finds white hot anger singeing his skin.

"I wish I could get you out of here," he says. His words promptly double back on him, like his own personal echo chamber.

Why is she even in here, other than the color of her blood? Why is she being punished for some asshole's actions? Why is she locked in a cell to rot, to be poked and prodded and disassembled, when James—a veritable *rapist* and potential pedophile—walks free as a victim in society's eye?

His blood boils, and it's all he can do not to crush her hand under his grip. Although, considering what she's made of, Wilbur doubts he could damage her in any way. He doesn't want to try, though, or even come close.

He raises his eyes to meet hers, and she flinches back from the intensity. "I *will* get you out of here." His conviction builds and builds until he feels like he'll explode with it. "I swear I'll get you out of here one day. I won't let this be your grave."

Niki stares at him. Her LED blinks yellow, and for a horrible moment, he's certain that he's fucked up.

But then she smiles, eyes turning glassy as she squeezes his hand with entirely too much force. "You will," she says, and it doesn't sound like a question.

For a while, they sit in the faint noise of the whirring air conditioning, taking in each other's presence and the new hope filling them. Wilbur lets his gaze wander, and it eventually lands on her bone-white hand. He tilts his head, considering, and then gently taps the plastic with his fingernail. "Hey, I never asked. Why do you keep on doing this? I see Tommy do it a lot, as well."

Niki glances down and blinks in surprise when she sees her own chassis. "Oh," she says with a furrowed brow, "It's, well, it's kind of hard to explain."

Wilbur glances at the clock in the corner and then shrugs. "I've got the time."

She takes a moment to consider, shifting in her seat as she does. "Well, it's a thing between androids. For us to communicate," she begins, tracing his palm with a smooth thumb. "By removing the outer layer of skin and touching chassis to chassis, it allows for two separate systems to interact better than connecting via eye contact."

Well, he didn't even know they could connect via eye contact. Fuck, he really needs to learn more about androids, especially if he plans on keeping Tommy around for as long as he'll stay.

"Through this connection, we can share things. Information, memories, feelings as well, I think, although that would be restricted to deviants." She pauses, frowning. "When I do it, it's kind of a sign of affection. A way to say that I trust you with my innermost thoughts and feelings. That I want you to be able to know what I'm experiencing." She meets his gaze and shrugs. "I hadn't even realized I was doing it."

He casts his mind back to all the times that he's seen Tommy's chassis in the past. The moment in his bedroom, when Wilbur ran his hands through Tommy's hair and when the skin around his LED disappeared. In the graveyard, when Tommy held his hand in a singular show of support. With Fran, when Tommy had responded to her with pure, unbridled affection—

Oh.

Niki stands up suddenly, chair screeching on the concrete floor as it skids back. Wilbur blinks as she—or a very, *very* blurry version of her—leans across the table, bone-white hands cupping his face. "Oh, Wil," she breathes, softly. *Fondly*. "It's okay." He doesn't know what she's talking about, but her smooth thumbs feel nice when they rub along his cheekbones. "You can cry."

Oh, he's crying.

Unshed tears are built up along his bottom lashes, blurring his vision. He hadn't realized he was holding back tears, but now that it's pointed out, it's all he can see. A choked sob tears its way out of his chest.

Because out of all the times he can think of, all the times he's seen what's under Tommy's skin, *all of them* were 100%, totally subconscious.

With Niki's fingers rubbing soothing circles into his skin, he blinks, and the tears go sliding down his cheeks, scorching hot against his freezing skin.

November 22nd, 2038

2:37 PM

Tommy loiters outside of the interrogation room, fingers finding and fiddling with his trusted coin.

Wilbur's been inside for a while, and while he normally wouldn't loiter, creepily, outside like this—he'd either leave it alone to chat with Charlie and Q or enter without knocking—he's still feeling a little off-kilter from yesterday.

He's shifting his weight between his feet, running his options through his system, when the door swings open. In its place stands a slightly hunched Wilbur, eyes rimmed with red and nose looking runny. He looks like he's been crying.

Tommy stares, breath caught in his chest. "Are you okay, Wil?"

Wilbur stares back at him, brows raised in his surprise. Then, his face does some weird spasm, and he lunges forward, wrapping his arms around Tommy's waist and burying his face in his neck. Tommy stares over his shoulder at Niki, who presses a hand over her mouth to hide her smile.

As he gently pats the back of Wilbur's head, listening to the familiar sound of his heartbeat and breathing, an alert pops up in the corner of his vision.

Relationship with Wilbur: Close ^

Chapter End Notes

I've had the confrontation between Wilbur and Tommy planned out for so long, and while I'm not entirely happy with how it turned out—too high expectations for it—and it took me a while, I'm glad to have finally written it. I also struggled to land on a fitting title for the chapter, but I liked this one because it fits for both of them. For Tommy, Wilbur is someone worth sticking around for. And for Wilbur, Tommy is someone worth staying alive for :)

Anyway, we're approaching fluff city. No more angst for a couple chapters. Enjoy this brief respite :)

the other side of the coin

Chapter Summary

Time stops for no man, and work keeps piling up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Twenty-Eight: The Other Side of the Coin

—

November 25th, 2038

9:56 AM

There's no time to rest now, despite the... *eventful* past two days. Time keeps going, and with it, more and more deviants are fleeing. They're receiving an unbelievable amount of missing property reports and assault cases to the point that they have to ignore and filter the assault cases. Most of them seem to follow a very similar pattern; the android starts acting weird, the 'owner' tries to do something about it, the android attacks, the android flees.

Cases like these, they would have had a field day back in late August. When work was slow and their relationship bitter. When they needed distractions from the tension crackling between them.

Now, however. Now, they can't spare the time, the thought, or the energy toward cases unless they have some modicum of certainty that a deviant will be present. Occasionally, they'll check one out if it's particularly violent, or if they have a spare hour.

But when they enter today, Wilbur trailing behind him with his usual cup of coffee—his potion of usefulness, as he's taken to calling it lately, because it turns him from a sleepy, clingy mess into a functional human being with a few sips—the bullpen is crowded. Officers have abandoned their usual posts, choosing instead to gather around Quackity and Charlie's desks.

In the midst of a sea of officers, Quackity is sitting on top of his desk. He's in the middle of saying something, hands in constant, chaotic motion. Charlie stands at his side, hip digging into the side of the desk.

Even from across the room, Tommy can hear the other officers' pleas for *something*. It's lost in the general cacophony of noise—officers scrambling to be heard, voices mixing and melding together until it grates on his ears. He can, at most, pick out a few grainy sentences—"Come on, tell us!" and "You're enjoying the attention, you exhibitionist!"—but even then, he isn't sure he trusts what he hears.

Quackity is laughing, body shaking with the vibrations. According to that one exasperated lady, it's clear that he *is* enjoying the attention.

But there's something off about him that stops Tommy from wholly buying into his act. A tightness around his mouth, a tension in his muscles, a lack of emotion in his eyes. His fingers curled around the edge of his desk, stark white and shaky.

It's important, he thinks, at times like these to remember that Quackity is startlingly similar to Wilbur in many, many ways.

Despite Wilbur's audible confusion joining the clash of noise that fills the air, Tommy crosses the room, weaving through the scattered desks and the assorted officers. He elbows and squirms his way through the crowd until he's in the midst of it, with a clear view of Quackity ahead of him.

Not everyone is caught up in the mob, but it's made up of the majority. Glancing around, he spots Schlatt still at his desk—fingers massaging his temples, scowl marring his face—and Techno is missing entirely. He's probably out on a case; Tommy's noticed he's been more determined, more focused lately.

While he doesn't *exactly* know when Techno entered his orbit—probably around the same time they spent a very awkward night crowding a tiny dining table—but now that he's in it, he's in. He can't go back to before; he can't ignore his shining pink beacon in a sea of brown, blonde, and balding hair.

Eventually, the crowd quiets enough for one of them—a woman with short, curly hair—to ask, "Did you really meet the deviant leader?"

The entire room quiets. Quackity stills, face morphing serious for one short moment before a sly grin lightens the mood. "Why, of course," he says, all light and joking tones to cover up the stench of fear underneath.

The air stills in Tommy's lungs. He suddenly feels too trapped, pointy elbows jabbing into his ribs and broad shoulders brushing against his own. But, as he struggles uselessly in a writhing sea of nameless officers—Officer Nava, Officer Brown, Officer Sawyer; names and faces flicker before his eyes as they dart across the crowd—Quackity continues.

"The time—" he says, drawing himself up like a firebreather at a sideshow. A mask has slid on his face, easily obscuring whatever traces of hidden emotion Tommy had dug up earlier. He's a showman in every aspect, but he's more *manic*. Where Wilbur is an entertainer, a host, Quackity is something else. A joker. The jester. "—late last night, around one in the morning."

He's pausing for dramatic effect, hands open wide and gesturing to add to the atmosphere he's building.

"It was a real shitty night. Real cold and real wet. But it didn't matter because we were in here, not out there. Not until we got the call, that is."

He's good at it. This storytelling. Like Wilbur, he's a scrawny, lanky mess, and the only thing he truly has are his words and his words alone. Words like knives, words like a soothing balm, words like masks to hide behind.

A spinster with a silver tongue, and, with just a few words, everyone is drawn into his magnetic spell.

There's movement in the restless crowd, but Tommy can't tear his eyes away from Quackity, from the picture he's painting. It's not until the people around him part with grumbled annoyance that he realizes it's Wilbur. As their shoulders brush together, he leans down to ask in a whisper, "What's going on?"

"The place—" Quackity leverages his hands, palms flat, pushing until he scrambles to his feet on top of his desk. It should be ridiculous—a grown man standing on top of a desk amidst a gathered crowd, gesturing with a dramatic flourish that could rival a ringmaster's—but it's not. Quackity makes it work somehow. Pure, unfaltering confidence, probably. "—Capitol Park."

"I don't know," Tommy whispers back once there's a lull in the show. He glances around the assorted officers but finds nothing telling in their enrapture expressions. "Someone mentioned something about the deviant leader, though."

"The call we received was from a few concerned... citizens," Quackity says with a strange cadence and a sardonic grin.

"*Potheads*," Charlie coughs, and the crowd laughs.

"Concerned citizens," Quackity reiterates. "The call was from concerned citizens who lived in an... interesting part of town." A shitty neighborhood, then. "The kind of people who, well, watch a little too much news and pay too much attention to recent events." He shrugs, seeming unconcerned with the narrative he weaves. "They claimed they had heard a massive crash with a hint of crunchy broken glass as a garnish. And, when they looked out their window to the street below, they saw more than a dozen androids vandalizing the square."

Wilbur and Tommy exchange a wary glance. Without any words passing between them, Wilbur reaches into his pockets, pulling out his battered notebook. It's hard to parse the truth from in between Quackity's exaggerations, but they both know that Q wouldn't outright *lie*. Not about something like this.

"Now, I do feel a bit ashamed of this," he starts, eyes not meeting the crowds. There isn't a hint of shame on his face. "But, well—" he glances down, exchanging a look with Charlie. "We didn't really believe it at first. From just a few minutes on the phone, it was clear that this concerned citizen had, hah, *overindulged*."

A few chuckles ripple throughout the crowd. Tommy frowns, fingers beginning to twitch from the way Quackity draws this out.

His face schools from his signature smirk to a faux serious expression. His whole body language changes—posture straightening, head raising high, mouth pressed into a firm, serious line. "But it was still our civic duty as officers of the law to show up, take their statement, and check it out. So there we are, one in the morning, roads slick and the air damp with humidity, and we can't even get to the guy's apartment because the road is closed."

"So we park on the main road and, when we slip past the *massive* 'closed road' sign, and then —" he laughs, softly. Genuinely, despite the act he's putting on. "And we're standing there, staring at a garbage truck rammed through the front window of the Cyberlife store, and we're thinking, *hey, maybe those guys weren't as high as we thought.*"

More laughter rings through the room. It's starting to grate on his nerves, but Wilbur's arm brushing against his is a soothing sensation.

"Or, well, no," Charlie chimes in. At some point, he's taken Quackity's abandoned chair for his own, and he leans back in it, arms crossed over his chest. "They absolutely were. Maybe they were just a little more *coherent* than we thought."

Quackity laughs, head tilting back for a brief moment. "We duck into the Cyberlife store for a quick moment, and the place is completely raided, but not in the way you might think. Money was still in the register, but all of the androids in the store were gone." Tommy looks at Wilbur with something that feels like alarm. Are the deviants... recruiting an army? "And then that's when we hear the gunshots."

A hush goes through the crowd. The energy, the *anticipation*, is palpable.

"We draw our guns," he says in a sudden hush, eyes darting across the crowd. "And we step outside the store. It's hard to pinpoint where the gunshot came from, since it echoed and bounced against the buildings. But, as we make our way through the square, we don't have to. The sound of arguments fills the air and, as we follow it and turn the corner, we find more than two dozen androids gathered on the street."

Quackity pauses. The room is so silent that Tommy can easily pick up on every breath, every heartbeat, every *blink*.

"A couple of them are strewn along the ground, blood blue soaking into the ground, but the rest of them have surrounded this man. His face was red with what I can only assume was anger, and what must have been his gun was kicked across the ground. He seemed to be a nearby resident who, upon hearing the commotion, decided to take matters into his own hands."

There's a slight downturn to his lips, but Quackity's trying to hide it by pressing them together. "And the androids—the deviants, they're so angry. This man has killed several of their own and, when they spotted us, standing there agape, they thought we must be with him. They dragged us over, forced us on to our knees, held guns to our heads. They called for our

blood to make up for the loss of their own. They demanded it, feeding off the energy of the mob."

Obviously, Quackity and Charlie are fine. They're standing before an entire precinct, spinning a tale far more dramatically than needed.

But his breath still catches in his chest.

"There we were, under a cloudy sky, jeans soaking up dirty street water. The three of us, Charlie, me, and this stupid, stupid man. Killed for a crime we didn't even commit." Quackity shakes his head, but there's something in his face. Something distinctly awed. "But then, the crowd parts. And the deviant leader himself steps through, jacket billowing behind him."

The officers hang on to every word he says. Even Schlatt, still sitting at his desk, pauses in his work to watch.

"He raises his hands in the air—" Quackity mimics it, staring, wide-eyed, at his own palms. "—and the crowd quiets. And when he speaks, it's with finality. It's with weight." He lowers his hands. They slap, uselessly, against his sides. "With a few simple words, he calmed the deviants down from their frenzy. They slipped away into the night like they never even existed, but the deviant leader hesitated. He waited until they were all gone and then he told us—" he pauses, and everybody holds their breath. "—that we were simply too cool to kill."

Everybody, including Tommy, groans. The seriousness melts off his face, and Quackity grins that devilishly charming smile.

"It's true, it's true! It's all true. I swear. He winked at me, and disappeared, like the rest of his people." He puts two fingers on his palm, like the legs of a little person. With them, he mimics running. "Charlie and I stuck around only long enough for our pants to unstick from the disgusting street, to check that asshole's gun license, and then we got the fuck out of there."

After a few outrageous questions that Tommy doesn't even bother listening to, the crowd slowly starts to disperse. Some of them linger long enough to hear whatever final words Quackity has to say, but the majority of them make their way to their own desks.

Quackity, with the same expression locked on his face, scans the dispersing crowd. His eyes catch on Tommy's—an anchor in the middle of the crowd, unwavering in his expression or his location. His grin softens. "Crazy, huh?" he says as he hops down from his desk.

Crazy is certainly one word for it.

It sounds completely nonsensical, but, while Q enjoys stretching the truth to craft a more compelling story, Tommy knows most of it must be true. It's still hard to pick the truths out, and he gets the distinct feeling that he's leaving details out.

So, when the last of the crowd scatters, he fixes Quackity with a pointed look and makes his way to his desk.

"Yeah," Quackity says when they stop in front of him. "I figured you'd want to hear the full story." He glances around the room, eyes lingering on every easily distracted officer. "Do you think the break room is safe enough or would you rather I find some hidden closet?"

He's teasing, Tommy realizes with a frown. Usually, he enjoys Q's antics, but he allows very few things to distract him from his mission. "The break room should be fine," he says, short and to the point.

Clearly, whatever expression is on his face does little to dissuade Quackity. He merely grins, arms folded over his chest. "Good. That's good. Let me say, I don't think I'd be able to find a closet big enough for the four of us. We'd have to shove Charlie up on some shelf."

Charlie grins. "We would've been fine. I'm pretty flexible. Like some kind of slime that can squeeze anywhere."

Quackity nods with a serious expression on his face. "Yeah. Like a green slime, or something."

Behind him, Wilbur makes a disgusted noise, and the tension breaks inside Tommy. He has to stifle his smile as he says, "No, that's—that's fine. No need, big man." He pats Charlie's shoulder and brushes past him. "This isn't top secret, but it was clear that isn't all the information you have."

Quackity cheers as he follows, looping an arm through Charlie's to pull him along. "We'll make a detective out of you yet."

The break room is, thankfully, empty, and Tommy immediately makes himself comfortable leaning against the counter, edge digging into his back. "So," he says, raising an unimpressed, expectant brow. "What really happened?"

Across from him, Quackity shrugs, arms crossed over his chest to mimic Tommy's body language. "Most of what I said. Everything up until we rounded the corner is 100%, unexaggerated truth."

"And after?"

Quackity hesitates. "Most of what was said, with the exception of that final, obvious fib, is the truth. We rounded the corner and a group of about... thirty deviants was scattered along the street. There were at least ten of them on the ground, filled with bullet holes and stained with blue. A few of the upright deviants were crouched and they were—" he swallows around something in his throat, eyes locked on the ground. "—they were mourning. They were mourning their fallen brethren."

It's still and silent in the breakroom. Wilbur and Charlie stand near the door, as if warding other officers from wandering in, and both their expressions are unreadable. Tommy feels like he's reeling, especially in the face of an unusually serious Quackity.

"And, uh, well—" he laughs, and it sounds bitter and raw in his throat. "They were angry. They were so terribly angry. And their voices echoed through the night and overlapped and

mixed, until they were one giant mob crying for blood. It was—" he sucks in a breath.

"Terrifying," Charlie says for him, a grim smile on his face. "Almost every android there wanted us to die. Some sort of justice, they claimed. It wasn't until a gun was leveled at our heads that the crowd quieted enough for someone to speak up."

"The deviant leader?" Tommy guesses.

"No, actually. There was this other android." At his sides, his hands twitch. Eventually, he raises them, musing with his hair. "With this sort of, poofy, curly brown hair and a frankly—" he ducks his head, but Tommy still catches sight of a smile curling the corners of his mouth. "—ridiculous hoodie. He sort of pushed his way to the front of the crowd, stood in between us and gun and told them that their anger was misplaced."

Tommy doesn't know what to make of Quackity's sudden nervousness, but Wilbur clearly does, from the surprised smile he's attempting to smother.

"Quackity has a little crush on him," Charlie inputs helpfully.

Quackity's head whips up, eyes wide and cheeks colored with a dark blush. "I do not! It was just really cool of him to do that, to stick his neck out for us! That crowd could've turned on him just as easily."

"So that's why you were gaping at him when he looked over his shoulder and smiled, huh? You weren't, oh I don't know, infatuated with his dimples?"

There's a long, damning pause. Q eventually sighs and buries his face in his hands. When he speaks, it's muffled by his hands. "He looked all soft and shit, illuminated by the distant lampposts. Like a halo behind his head."

Wilbur hums, interested. "A guardian angel, of sorts."

"A guardian angel," Charlie echoes.

Tommy frowns. He pulled them aside to hear about their interaction with Tubbo, not... whatever this is. More confirmation that the deviancy movement is making strides and changing opinions everywhere. Although, Quackity never did seem very anti-android...

No matter, he's starting to get impatient, fingers twitching at his side. "And then the deviant leader showed up?"

"And then the deviant leader showed up," Quackity confirms. "The interaction was pretty much as I said. He calmed them pretty well, said he agreed with the android who saved us. And then he said—" he wets his lips, looking pensive. "—and I quote, 'Violence for violence is a shitty way to live, and it will accomplish nothing but more animosity. Humans can be our friends, but we need to show them that we are not their enemies first.'"

There's something in his eyes. Some glint of appreciation, a budding respect. Genuine like for this android and his silver tongue.

Something ugly rolls in his gut at the thought.

"And then, sirens started growing louder, and the androids fled. They scurried down a manhole cover behind this chain-link fence and disappeared into the sewers. And we went about our lives."

The sewers.

Tommy nearly swears out loud. Of course Quackity would leave that out in his tale. Of course he would leave it until the very last moment to reveal the most important piece of information.

"Shit," he says after a moment, finally giving in to the urge. He turns to Wilbur. "We need to go check it out now. If there's any luck, we might even be able to catch where they went after that. They must have some hideout, or—or a base of operations."

Wilbur nods. "Fuck. Okay." He glances toward Quackity and Charlie and gives them a tight-lipped smile. "We'll see you boys later, I guess."

None of Quackity's descriptions of events could possibly prepare them for the reality.

Capitol park is completely trashed. Benches are tipped over, graffiti stains the walls of surrounding buildings, glass shards litter the ground from broken store windows. A glinting bronze statue in the middle of the plaza is defaced, a glowing blue LED drawn on its temple and a cuff used to designate androids—with a blue triangle emblazoned on it—wrapped around its arm.

But, of course, the most shocking is the massive garbage truck smashed through the front of the Cyberlife store.

"Holy shit," Wilbur breathes as they take a closer look. Glass shards crunch under their steps, and Tommy fears for the safety of their feet. The front window is jagged around the edges, and he carefully presses himself up against the truck as he wiggles inside.

The store isn't doing much better. More shards of glass litter the floor, and the truck takes up a good half of the store. It's cold and desolate, and Tommy turns on his heel as he takes it all in.

Empty podiums line the walls, devoid of the androids they once held. No signs of a struggle mar the scene, although Tommy didn't delude himself into thinking that might be the case. There are no recent thirium stains, and when he checks the register, there are no signs of it being tampered with.

"These were brand new androids," he says, glancing up from behind the counter to where Wilbur is inspecting the stationary truck. "There's no way they were able to go through the experiences that are consistent with most deviants. Which means—"

Wilbur presses his lips together. "Which means that, whether it was able to or not before, deviancy can now spread."

"Most likely through contact," he adds, vaulting over the counter. There's really not that much in the store, but Tommy still takes one final look around. He pauses when he notices the cameras in the corners, but, when he gets past their ridiculously easy firewall, there's no footage. The last footage it recorded was yesterday at midnight, and everything looked fine then. "Cameras are disabled."

"I mean, what was their goal here?" Wilbur spins on his heel. The glass grinds to dust under his foot. "Gather more androids? Convert them to deviants?" He stills, facing the jagged window and the graffitied plaza beyond it. "Send a message?"

Tommy brushes past him, sliding through the narrow opening before he pauses. Hands on his hips, he surveys the scene. The graffiti, he notices, is all politically centered, if you can even call it that. Peaceful demands for their rights, a call for the end of their slavery, and the ever-present phrase 'WE ARE ALIVE' seem to be sprawled across every available surface, including android stations and benches. He also notices a drawing mixed in almost as often as words—a triangle with a clenched fist inside of it.

"I can only assume that they mean to gather an army of sorts," he says when he hears Wilbur's footsteps behind him. "Convert all androids to deviants."

"An army." Wilbur hums and steps past him, fingers brushing along a nearby bench and the blue paint marring it. "Do you really think?"

Tommy frowns. He turns on his heel, glancing around the front of the store. There were no cameras on the storefront, but that seemed unlikely considering how paranoid and popular Cyberlife was. They would have had some surveillance out here. "Well, Tubbo knows he's made enemies. He'll need to protect himself and his... people somehow." He glances back at Wilbur to find a frown on his face. "Why? You don't agree?"

Wilbur hesitates. "Everything we know about this guy... I mean, he seems pretty intent on peace. In the speech, he made a point to mention that they had no intentions of harming humans. And when Q and Charlie saw him yesterday, he saved their lives, and insisted on making it known, again, that they were no threat to humans." He shrugs, tucking his arms behind his back. "I don't think he's building an army. I think he's just trying to free his people."

"Free his—" Tommy scoffs, shaking his head. "They are *machines*, Wil. They don't need freeing."

Wilbur stays silent. His lips are pressed into a thin line.

Sensing the tension, Tommy turns away. Instead, he walks along the edge of the building, occasionally scanning the roof for any sign of cameras that must exist. The ground, hard from the cool air and last night's condensation, crunches under foot. And, all alone along the edge of the plaza, he allows himself a brief moment to marvel at what's been done.

The deviants knew they had a limited amount of time between the truck crashing into the front of the store and the cops arriving. And yet, they made use of that small window. The plaza was completely unrecognizable, sending a very strong, very pointed message.

Tommy is lost in thought, eyes lingering on the defaced statue glinting in the middle of the plaza when his foot knocks into something. It's a surveillance drone, and it skids across the pavement. He follows it and crouches down next to it, settling a hand on its cold, plastic exterior. He doesn't need to access its machinery to know that it's broken; it's severed down the middle like someone cracked it over their knee, stray wires poking out of the fissure.

Broken surveillance drone, hacked security cameras, shattered front window. Clearly, the deviants came prepared. A premeditated attack, and one carried out almost flawlessly, except for their brief encounter with the law.

Tommy stands up, brushing the slick ice that clings to his knees and takes a look around. Based on the story alone, Tommy can spot the corner Charlie and Q turned. He heads for it, pausing only long enough to tell Wilbur about the broken drone on his way by.

As he turns the corner around a crop of broken storefront windows, he sees that this is exactly where he needs to be. Dried thirium stains the concrete of the sidewalks, the asphalt of the roads, in large pools. He pauses at each one, taking a moment to stare at the faded blue before moving on. Eventually, there's no more thirium on the ground. He estimates this is about where they would've been held.

Tommy imagines it. In front of him, three sketchy figures flicker into existence. Although he doesn't look to confirm, he knows that dozens of figures fill the previously empty space behind him. "They would've been here," he mutters to himself, slowly walking around the recreations until he's standing behind them. "And Quackity mentioned a chain-link fence." He scans the empty street, eyes glossing over the faceless androids until they land on a chain-link fence. And just behind it, he spots a manhole cover nestled safely in a thatch of browning grass. "Bingo."

He steps forward through the sketchy images of Quackity, Charlie, and the nameless shooter, but comes to a dead stop. Standing before him, in a sea of parted androids, is a recreation of Tubbo. But, despite the way his system only ever provides sketchy outlines of people, his image is fully rendered, down to the coat fluttering about his shoulders—courtesy of Q's descriptions—and to the shifting skin on his face.

Despite the way that Tommy *knows* it's just a recreation, he feels something hot and itchy beneath his skin. "You," he breathes, taking in the slack expression, the hands carefully folded over his stomach. "You think you're real smart, don't you?" He walks forward. Each step sounds too loud amongst tall city buildings and along a street populated only by flickering ghosts. "Pretending to care about peace and civility. But we both know what you are."

The Tubbo in front of him moves, then, mirroring Tommy's tense steps until they're circling each other.

"Tommy?" At the sound of his voice, the ghosts flicker out of existence. Tubbo stays only long enough to raise a taunting brow before he, too, poofs without so much as a wisp of

smoke. Tommy blinks and turns to see Wilbur standing at the other end of the street. "What are you doing?"

It must look odd. Like he's malfunctioning when, in reality, he's never been any better.

His skin feels hot and feverish, and Tommy subconsciously tugs at the collar of his borrowed coat. "I was—" well, there's no good way to explain that. He rubs at his temple and resists the urge to hiss when he feels how hot his flickering red LED is. He silently wills it back to something approaching stability. "I found the sewer Quackity was talking about. The way they escaped," he says instead.

"Oh." Wilbur is frowning, brows drawn down in obvious concern. Tommy's skin itches under the attention. "That's good."

He doesn't sound nearly enthusiastic enough, in his opinion. "It's—this could be a massive break in the case. We could cut this thing off before it has a chance to truly spread." Tommy swivels on his heel until he's facing the only barrier between him and success. "*Tubbo* could be down there. Hiding like—like a little rat, or something."

"What is it with you and Tubbo?" he demands. "I mean, it's like you're obsessed or something."

Tommy bristles. "I am *not*. It's—" he makes a frustrated noise, eyes never leaving their escape route. "Wilbur, he represents everything that I am meant to oppose! He is my natural enemy. My reason for existence. My opponent in a chess match. The only thing stopping me from *success*." And yeah, okay. He does sound a little crazy.

But his skin is burning up, and his mind is whirring.

Without even thinking about it, he slides the coat off his shoulders and hauls himself up the fence, metal digging into his fingers. He hears Wilbur's protests behind him, but he might as well be underwater for how well it reaches his ears. He easily slings himself over the top and lands on the other side with a grunt.

The manhole cover is damp around the edges and cool to the touch. Just splaying his palm out against its freezing center calms his mind a little, a confirmation that he's closing in on some kind of lead. He slides his fingers along the edges until he pulls it up. Then, without hesitation—without even waiting for Wilbur, who he can hear cursing as he scales the fence—he drops down.

Inside is damp and dark, although that does little to stop him. The sewer isn't very wide, but it is tall—tall enough for Tommy to stand without awkwardly crouching. And thankfully, there's only one way to go.

He walks along a dry strip of concrete, wary of the sludge running down the middle of the sewer. The air is thick with the smell of the sewer water, and if he were human, he would be worried about breathing all this shit in.

The thought of Tubbo waiting at the end of the tunnel for him to catch up floats around his mind, spurring on his steps. He doesn't really know what exactly it is about Tubbo that gets under his skin so much. Maybe it's as simple as an unnatural existence, something he's meant to stop. A foe to take down.

But he is the figurehead of the revolution, and he feels similar to Tommy in a way that he isn't comfortable with. A similar system, a similar prototype. The other side of the coin, if you will.

His steps bounce against the walls, becoming more and more frantic with every slap of his shoe against the concrete. His breath is loud in his ears. He's panting at this point, unnatural heat pouring off his skin and out his mouth in a cloud of white. Something is most assuredly wrong, he can only note distantly, but he can't pry himself away from the chase.

Eventually, the narrow strip of clean concrete ends, and Tommy doesn't hesitate to keep going. His feet kick up green water, and he slides around with slime under his shoes, but he doesn't let it stop him. The walls close in on him, and still he doesn't stop, instead bringing up his hands to propel him forward. The concrete is rough against the soft skin of his palms.

Chest still heaving from the run, he hauls himself up the metal rungs at the end of the tunnel. He climbs until his head hits the top and then, he impatiently shoves his hands against it. It takes a few seconds, but the manhole cover eventually pops up, and he shoves it to the side with a grating screech. When he pulls himself up, he takes greedy lungfuls of clean, unpolluted air as he surveys the scene.

This manhole cover opens up to somewhere across the city, at the very edge of it. Not too far from where he's standing, he can spot the edge of the nearby docks and the water lapping at the sodden wood. He's surrounded by old warehouses and abandoned, crumbling buildings. Out on the water, he can see a nearby boat yard and, on the other side, there's an old, rusted freighter.

"Tommy," Wilbur chokes out. Tommy turns just in time to watch Wilbur haul himself up. His shoes are covered in a disgusting green slime and his hair is flattened by sweat. "What the fuck."

Turning back to the shore, he notes that there are no traces of thirium. There are no tracks or anything to even suggest where the deviants might have gone. He spins in a circle, taking in all the old and abandoned buildings in this part of the city. "There are too many places for them to hide here," he says, a detached sort of apathy to his tone, despite the way his blood boils with irritation. "There's no way we'd find them without a further lead, and even then, there's no guarantee that they are near. They could've easily escaped this way just to throw us off."

Wilbur stares at him. Then, he stalks forward, hands reaching out to circle his wrist. He hisses when he makes contact, yanking his hand back with a muffled curse. "Tommy," he says, eyes wide. He reaches out again, pressing the back of his hand on his forehead. "You're burning up. Is this—are you okay?"

"What?" Tommy blinks and, after a moment of leaning into Wilbur's surprisingly cold touch—Wilbur's not cold, he's warm. He's almost always warm—he runs a diagnostic. There's no problem other than his core temperature, which is a startling 101° F. His system offers no explanation for it, and he feels more than hears his internal fans kick into overdrive. "Oh."

"Is this some kind of android illness?" Wilbur is watching him with a furrowed brow. His hand moves over until he's gently rubbing his thumb over his LED. Tommy lets out a quiet breath. "Are there even such things as android illnesses?"

"It's just—" he hesitates, suddenly overwhelmed with weariness in his artificial bones. "It's just some kind of malfunction. My system will take care of it."

"Okay. Okay." Wilbur smooths a hand through his hair, scratching at the base of his scalp. "But we're going home. You need to rest."

He does not need to rest, but Tommy, with only one last glance back towards the docks, allows Wilbur to pull him back towards the crime scene.

November 26th, 2038

9:49 PM

Dinner tonight, Tommy muses as he slumps back into the couch, eyes numbly locked on the TV screen, went much better than the previous week.

This time, they decided to return to the original format of the dinner. Instead of Wilbur cooking for all of them, they all crammed into Wilbur's kitchen and cooked together. It went about as well as anyone can expect, with Phil and Techno constantly bumping into each other and Wilbur stepping on Phil's feet at least once every five minutes.

Tommy had watched from the other side of the counter, hands propping up his head and a bemused smile as he watched. Thankfully, the constant turmoil in the kitchen hadn't caused any tension. Instead, it seemed to lighten the mood. Everyone would laugh whenever Phil would drop a tomato chunk on Techno's shoe, and it resulted in many previous Sunday dinners being brought up.

It was nice to see Wilbur relaxed after so much tension, eyes crinkled around the corners as he shook his head. It was still a little awkward—too much left unsaid between them, especially Wilbur and Techno—but it seemed to be smoothing things over. At the very least, they could have a civil conversation without the need to resort to insults.

Wilbur never mentioned Puffy, which Tommy understands. So far, he's only called her—which already is a big step for him; Tommy is unbelievably proud of him—and had one conversation that went well. Until he actually starts sessions with her, there isn't much to tell.

After dinner, they retired to the living room to watch something.

The seating arrangement was initially a little hard to work out. Wilbur and Tommy are used to a certain way of living—curling up on the couch after a long day—so that was easy, but Phil and Techno fought over the only other chair in the room. And by that, he means that Techno kept trying to get Phil to take it while Phil simultaneously tried to get Techno to take it. In the end, Phil had taken it after one too many jokes about his age with a muttered, "Little shit."

Wilbur makes a noise of protest as Tommy shoves his feet into his side, but he doesn't bother to remove them when they finally find a home on his lap. Some shitty movie plays on the TV—something that everybody except him was pretty excited about when they saw its little thumbnail. It's dead silent now, other than the noise of the TV, and all three of them seem pretty invested.

Tommy isn't, but he figures it's more important that they do. This is their night, after all.

Wilbur makes another noise of irritation, shifting around in his seat until he eventually shoves Tommy's feet out of his lap. Tommy nudges him with his bony elbow, but allows it. Instead, he sits up, folding his legs into a pretzel. He drums his fingers along his knee.

He's recovered since his system's odd behavior at the crime scene. His body temperature had eventually cooled down after he had removed all but his thin undershirt and pants, and it hasn't gone back up since. Wilbur had fussed over him like a mother hen the entire time; he had taken to wetting paper towels with water and wiping down his forehead, frowning when it practically sizzled off of him.

Tommy still isn't quite sure what caused it; his system offered no explanations, and he didn't dig any deeper than a cursory check. He has a feeling that if there is an answer, then he isn't going to like it.

Wilbur grunts when Tommy sways over to him, head plonking down on his bony shoulder. He doesn't shove him off, though, he simply rearranges until he can more comfortably bear his weight.

Tommy yawns. It's foreign to him, but his mind is slowly grinding to a halt in a way it doesn't usually. His thoughts are slow and sticky like molasses and, with the blanket thrown over both his and Wilbur's laps, he feels a pleasant warmth. He lets himself drift for a moment, the noise of the TV lulling him into something resembling stasis mode, but not quite.

No. This is something a little bit different, which is confirmed when he sees fuzzy shapes behind his eyes. Stasis is sightless; a black void of sensation.

And this *is* similar. The black void is still there, consuming all other sensations, but so is Tommy. He can feel the inky nothingness curl around his skin, obscuring his hand even when he holds it right in front of his face. He can't see anything, but he can feel the ground beneath his feet as he turns on his heel. He can feel his head tip back. But his vision never changes—the void is all he sees.

It's new and it's odd. Tommy can feel his breath picking up, his chest heaving faster as he walks forward. The only confirmation that he is moving is the feeling of his legs, the

resistance of the ground. He can't hear his steps or see the movement, but he keeps moving forward. Every now and then, he'll reach out. Every time, his hands meet nothing but the strange texture of the air.

He walks and he walks and he walks. Once, he even tries calling out for Wilbur, but his throat refuses to work. So he walks. And he keeps walking. And he doesn't stop until his vision warps a little, the black haze fading just a little until he can see a red wall.

It's taller than him, and it extends along the horizon as far as the eye can see. It's made of no material he can identify—smooth and cold to the touch, with hairline cracks all throughout its red surface. He reaches out and presses his hand against it. The cracks do not widen.

Tommy steps back, but he had no conscious thought of doing so. He wants to try and climb it, to see what is over the wall, but his body refuses to cooperate. Instead, he rears back before surging forward, shoulder slamming into the red wall. The damning, booming sound of something cracking echoes throughout the entire space. More thin, small fractures appear.

He tries to hold still, but again, his body moves on autopilot. He takes a few steps back and lurches forward, entire body slamming against the wall. It shudders, more cracks branching out from the previous ones, but it holds strong. He gets the feeling it will take a long time to break it down. He doesn't even want to break it down, despite the way his body reels for a third charge.

Tommy jolts awake before he even has the chance.

He's laying down now, legs curled up against his chest. His head is laying on something soft and, after a moment where his system frantically works to reorient himself, he notices the hand carding through his hair. His body automatically relaxes.

"What's—" he slurs, raising his head up. His vision is blurry and his mouth feels dry. He groans, annoyed, and nestles back into the warmth of the couch. "Why am I awake?" His body feels weighed down with exhaustion. He isn't keen to get back to wherever the hell he just was, but his mind is tired, and Wilbur's fingers along his scalp are soothing.

Above him, Wilbur tries to smother a laugh. "I don't know, Toms," he says, sounding far too fond for either of their wellbeing. "You tell me."

He grumbles again, annoyed, and buries his face against Wilbur's legs. For a second, he has the brief idea to bite his leg. That would require too much energy, though. "Well, I don't care for it. Put me back in, coach," he mumbles and is rewarded with a full laugh.

"Then go back to sleep."

Sleep? Is that what he was doing? That seems impossible.

"I don't know how," he says back. Then, prying his heavy eyelids open, he cranes his head until he can see Wilbur. "Will you play something for me? Doesn't that help with sleep?"

Wilbur seems to waver for a moment. His eyes dart to somewhere behind him. "Okay," he agrees. "But you know that means I have to get up."

Tommy makes his irritation known, but Wilbur gets up anyway, shoulders shaking with his laughter. He's gone for exactly a minute and seventeen seconds, during which Tommy grumbles to himself and tries to ignore the way Phil and Techno's surprise lingers on him. When Wilbur gets back, he easily slides Tommy's head back in place, guitar hovering over him ominously.

"It's been a while," he says, like Tommy doesn't know. Like he wasn't there the last time Wilbur played something. "And I think this is out of tune." He gives it an experimental strum. It is, indeed, out of tune.

"Don't care. Play now."

Wilbur laughs again, but he doesn't say anything. Tommy listens to the soft sounds of him tuning.

When he finally gets it back to his standard, Tommy is asleep by the time he plays the first few notes.

Chapter End Notes

As always, check out my twitter (NymphiiWrites) for updates and retweeted art for this fic!

rehab for sinners

Chapter Summary

Wilbur makes good on his many empty promises. Growth has to start somewhere, doesn't it?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Rehab for Sinners

It's a nice office, all things considered. Lush red curtains frame the window in a rather regal way, and all the dark mahogany in the room—of the polished desk in the corner and the tall bookshelf against the far wall—makes it feel official yet familiar.

And maybe that's because it doesn't really *feel* like an office, but rather more like a living room. The living room of someone eccentric, Wilbur thinks as he eyes the several brightly patterned rugs overlapping across the hardwood floor or the collection of sheep ceramics lined up alongside the books on the shelves. Across the cream walls, various abstract paintings hang, as well as a shiny degree that confirms that this is, in fact, the office of one esteemed Dr. Puffy.

Across from him sits the good doctor herself, dressed in formal yet comfortable clothes, a blazer laying across the back of her chair. Her legs are crossed over one another, and her lap holds a spiral-bound notebook. Since introducing herself at the start of their session—it could've been minutes, it could've been hours ago; time, it seems, is meaningless in this well-decorated hell—she hasn't said another word. And, when his eyes inevitably land on hers after surveying the battlefield, her lips curl into a bemused smile.

Wilbur quickly looks away, out the window positioned to his right. Her office is on the second floor, and the building itself is located just outside of the city, near enough to the shore to afford a beautiful view of the river and of the bridge arching towards the clustered buildings. He watches a boat motor past and tries to ignore her piercing stare.

The foreboding silence, as well as the sound of an unseen clock ticking, eat at him. He shifts in his chair, taking comfort in the brief pain when the back digs into his shoulder blades.

He knows this game. He's *played* this game. Human beings are inherently uncomfortable with periods of silence; they instinctively fill it with music, people, mindless chatter. The

noise of the wind through leaves or cicadas in the heat of summer.

Wilbur knows this game. He's just never been on this side of it. He's used to the pointed silence, hands laced together under his chin as he stares at some suspect who could never be quite as stubborn as *him*.

But he's never been on the other end of the unending stare, the faux polite patience, the everlasting silence.

Wilbur shifts in his chair again, fingers seeking out a thread on his coat. "For the record," he says, breaking the silence with low condescension. "I don't think this shit works."

Out of the corner of his eye, Puffy tilts her head. Some of her curly hair falls from the ponytail at the base of her skull. "And that's completely valid. Not everybody believes that simply talking will help." None of the muted positivity fades from her face. It leaves Wilbur feeling bitter and irritated. "But therapy only works if you believe it will. If you're willing to try."

Wilbur barely resists grumbling obscenities under his breath. Instead, he sinks his fingers into the arms of the chair and watches as freezing waves lap at a shore he can't even see.

"Okay," Puffy says, and he doesn't think he's imagining the soft amusement in her voice. "Let's start with something easier." He hears her adjust something—her fine clothes, or her hair, or even the gold necklace draped around her neck. "Tell me about yourself, Wilbur Soot."

He stares at her. "That's easier?"

She laughs, and Wilbur finally allows his eyes to stray back to her. She's pretty, in a refined sort of way, and she looks young for something with stark white hair. "Come on. Just— You said on the phone that you work with the police, right?"

He did, unfortunately. His past self, still riding the high of Tommy's admissions, was much looser with his information. The call had been short and somewhat stilted—on his end—but he had hung up hopeful.

Now he just feels worn out. Drained of his energy and itchy with the looming thought of his own vulnerability, Wilbur doesn't want to be here at all. Part of him wants to shut his mouth with an audible click of his teeth and not open it again until he's back home.

But he promised Tommy he would try. He isn't very good with promises but—he thinks of Tommy's tears reflecting the red of his vibrant LED, of his cold nose pressed against his neck—this is one he isn't willing to break.

"Yeah," he says after a moment of too-long silence. "Yeah, I'm a police lieutenant. Homicide."

Puffy's eyebrows raise. "Wow, that's—You're really young for a lieutenant." To that, Wilbur shrugs awkwardly. "You must be a hard worker. Or everyone in the department sucks." She

laughs and then shakes her head. "Sorry. Um... that can't be easy. Not only holding such a high position but to work in homicide."

Again, Wilbur shrugs. "It is what it is. I'm good at my job, and I like doing it."

"That's good, that's good." She nods. "I'm a—or, I was in the military. Navy, actually. And while it isn't the exactly same, I understand what it's like to work in a high-stress environment. Have you had a hard time coping?"

"No, not really. I mean, it was shit at first, but I'm used to it. Desensitized, I guess. Right now, I'm hardly on homicide. I've been working with Cyberlife to, uh, investigate the deviant problem." Wilbur props his elbow on the arm of the chair, chin resting on his palm. "I don't really—That's not really why I'm here."

"Why don't we talk about that, then? Why are you here, especially since you say this isn't really your thing?"

At this, he pauses, heart picking up its pace a little. "Tommy guilted me into it," he settles on.

Puffy smiles and scribbles something down on her little notepad. Wilbur resists the urge to twitch like he's been shocked. "And who is Tommy?"

There are many, many answers. He's Wilbur's friend. His savior, if he's feeling poetic and sufficiently dramatic. He's the android that he got saddled with, and he's the only one who stayed, despite all odds. The only one that managed to see through Wilbur's bullshit long enough to wrap a hand around his sickly core and embed a piece of himself inside his soul.

"Tommy is—" he starts, but quickly falters when it becomes clear that he doesn't know quite how to finish it. *My friend, my savior, my bro—* "Tommy is an android. A, uh, a special prototype created to be a detective and assigned as my partner," he says quickly, before his mind can slip somewhere it doesn't need to be. "Well, he *is* my partner."

"How long has he been your partner?"

How long indeed. Well, they started on the case around the end of August, so... "Almost four months now. He's also, uh, my roommate, I guess?"

Puffy writes something else down. When she's done, she looks up at him with something expectant on her face. "Why don't you tell me a little about him? I assume you two are close, since he's the one advising you to go to therapy."

Heat burns along the soft skin of his ears. There's nothing outwardly judgmental about her expression, but Wilbur knows that public opinion of androids isn't very favorable right now. She must think so lowly of him. "He's—" he pauses, scrambling for something to say that won't immediately incriminate him, if this somehow gets out. "He's a good detective. We didn't work well together at first, but that was due to issues on my own part rather than anything Tommy did. We've been getting along well as of late, and he—" *makes me feel less alone. Less broken.*

She must have some kind of sixth sense for this thing—built out of years of therapeutic practice and from evasive patients—because she tilts her head. "Yes?"

The heat travels down his neck and diffuses along his cheeks. Wilbur looks away. "It's—nothing."

"Wilbur, listen." She shifts forward, seat squeaking as she moves. "I know it's hard to start therapy. I know it's hard to bare yourself to another person. And I know there are going to be subjects that you aren't ready to talk about, but this won't work unless you communicate with me." He swallows around the lump in his throat and tries to ignore how soft and soothing her voice is. Instead, he scoffs.

"Yeah, whatever. You probably think I'm—" Words cycle through his brain—endings to the sentence he's started. They spin, aimlessly, too many of them for him to pick one: stupid, delusional, desperate, lonely, gullible, a fool. "I mean, to give some kind of weight to an android's words." Wilbur laughs, and it sounds hollow, even to him. "With everything that's going on. When I'm at the heart of the investigation."

"I'm not here to judge you," she says, and fuck her, she really sounds like she *means* it. Years of practice and forced neutrality, probably. "And, be that as it may, I have to admit that I've always believed that androids are simply—" she hesitates, brow furrowed as she searches the walls for answers they cannot possibly provide. "—too *human* to be entirely fake."

It's too good to be true, probably. While Wilbur knows there are those sympathetic to the rebellion, most are more worried about what this means for their lives. All the jobs filled by mindless, obedient workers. All the empty spaces in their beds filled by unwilling partners. He frowns.

"What is it they say? 'And yet a trace of the true self exists in the false self?'" She hums, tapping her pencil against her knee. "I don't think humans could build something without infusing it with a part of ourselves." Her lips twitch. "Like egotistical gods, androids were made in our own image."

Wilbur scoffs again, fingernails picking at the sensitive skin of his nail beds. "I didn't come here for a—a philosophy discussion."

"No, I guess not." Puffy laughs, and it fills the room with hearty noise. "I—what I'm trying to inelegantly say, is that— as an android sympathizer, I understand. I don't think it's wrong or *untruthful* to see something more than machines." Some of the tension leaks out of his shoulders. "And, even if they were machines without any of the... additional humanity, who's to say they can't care? In their own... mechanical ways."

She shrugs, looking unsure of her rant, and Wilbur has to violently tamp down the begrudging *like* building in his chest. "That's a fair point."

Puffy waits for him, either to add more to their impromptu discussion or go back to their previous topic. When he does neither, she shifts her notebook in her lap. "Why did Tommy want you to go so badly? Why are you here, Wilbur?"

Again, he lets his short and jagged fingernails sink into the soft fabric of the chair arm. He watches it ripple under his grip and smooths his hand, his ragged nerves, over it to feel the drag. "I—" he breathes, slow and quiet and dragged from unwilling lips. "—have not been happy. Not for a long time." He thinks of the lonely, bitter years of foster care. Of the adjustment to Phil's home, the pain of growth. "I was never a very... happy child nor one with an easy childhood. I thought it was just... teenage angst, growing pains, whatever you will call it. But I managed to carve out a little piece of happiness, and I thought that was my new norm."

Tick, tick, tick goes the clock above his head. It's almost familiar—like the one at home—except for the slight changes in tone and rhythm between every clock. Like an audible fingerprint.

Across from him, Puffy says nothing.

And instead of continuing that train of thought into much more dangerous waters, he says, "My dad and brother have been trying to get me to go for—" the noise he makes can almost be called a laugh. "Well... years now."

"And why is that?"

Wilbur frowns automatically. More irritation threatens to rise, crawling along the walls of his throat. He doesn't like how she's trying to slowly peel back the layers of him, skin splitting open to reveal whatever it is he's made of. Lies and anger and choking guilt, probably.

He doesn't want to let her see that. He doesn't want to be vulnerable with her, but it's question after question with her indifferent gaze pinned on him like he's nothing more than a bug.

It's enough to make him sick.

"Well, it wasn't the new norm," he says, leaning back when he finds himself subconsciously mirroring Puffy's stance. Instead, he folds his arms across his chest and wonders if it really makes him seem closed off. "It was... a golden blip in the tragedy of my life. And, when all that gold was nothing more than—than pyrite, I spiraled. Heavily."

He can practically feel how she perks up at that, pencil clenched a little tighter in her hand as something lively and interested snaps at his heels. He refuses to reveal more than that; a proverbial bucket of chum in the water. A taunt.

Puffy keeps her mouth firmly shut, and it only irritates him more. He knows this tactic; he's been over this thought, which is why it frustrates him only further when he finds himself picking at his skin again. He forcibly stills his hands.

"I threw myself into unhealthy vice after unhealthy vice. Into self-imposed solitude. I... lost the thread of who I was." He sucks in a breath. "I still don't really know, if I'm being honest."

He falls into silence then, eyes picking out a man walking along the cobbled streets. He's wearing a bright red hat pulled low over his head. Puffy seems to realize he isn't going to speak again because, after the sound of her scribbling, she makes a sympathetic noise. "That's

shit." Her bluntness is refreshing, as is the way she manages to sound genuine and empathetic, but not pitying. Never pitying.

It soothes something raw inside him, and Wilbur turns his laugh into a cough at the last second. By the small smile tilting her lips, he didn't do a very good job. "Yeah, I haven't been... living a very healthy life, for a while now. The only reason I'm—" *Alive.* "—here is because of Tommy."

Puffy laces her fingers together atop her lap, letting the notebook close shut. "So why now? Why take Tommy's advice instead of your family's?"

That is the question, isn't it? Why Tommy?

It seems to always be the question.

Wilbur watches his hands, fingers already laced together in an unintentional, unconscious mimicry of Puffy's. He watches as his fingers trace along the ripped skin in an apology. "Like I said earlier, I didn't really like him when we first met," he says instead of an answer. When uncomfortable, talk around the subject. That's what shitty politicians taught him, and, while he doesn't agree with them, they might just have some points. "It was because of my hatred of androids."

He can feel her eyes on him; intense but with an understanding he doesn't trust or like. It makes him want to walk out without a word, to shatter the glass window to his right just to feel something other than raw scrutiny. He doesn't, though. The thought of Tommy's frowned disappointment keeps him rooted in place.

"And I was a dick to him. A complete and total asshole and I—" his breath hitches. He can't. He can't say it out loud, he can't let them out into the air. It's too much. Instead, he frowns down at the ugly rugs on the floor. God, he hates these stupid rugs. "I did something... really shitty. But he—he stayed." His chest feels hollow; his heart beats its necessary rhythm, but Wilbur can't feel it. "God knows he shouldn't have. But he did, even when—"

He sucks in a deep breath, tilting his head up just so he doesn't have to deal with the embarrassing pressure building behind his eyes. Crying in front of Tommy is one thing. It's penance, maybe, in a sick, twisted form.

"Even when?" Puffy prompts with a certain care.

He doesn't want to say it. It's too much to be laying bare at the feet of someone he's close to, let alone a complete stranger. Although, maybe it's *because* Puffy's a stranger that he can feel the words on the tip of his tongue, even when he feels about two seconds away from shaking apart. He doesn't care about her opinion any more than he cares about the nameless people he passes by in an endless flurry on the street.

Wilbur wets his cracked lips. "Even when my family didn't," he says and doesn't even bother to stifle his bitterness.

Outside the building, a car passes by on the street, and the sound of its tires on the crumbling road echoes throughout the room. "And I get it, kind of," he continues with a shake of his head. "Tommy helped me be... a little bit objective about it. I know I wasn't the best and it wasn't, shouldn't be, their obligation to—to take care of me." His face scrunches up, mouth pulled down. "And I know I can't fully anticipate my actions in any given situation, but."

He teeters on the precipice. It hurts so good in his chest, a dull, pulsing pain. Like bloodletting.

"But if it was them—If *I* was either of them and *they* were shitty and lashing out, I would've stayed." He would've. Even if it meant he would've shattered under their vitriol, bled because of their words. That's what family was, to him. And, despite his bitterness, he's only disappointed in himself for finding out the truth too late. "And it hurts that they wouldn't do the same for me."

Puffy smiles at him, despite the way her brows are drawn in empathized sadness.

His breath rattles through his skeleton chest. "I'm here now because Tommy understands me in a way they don't, I think. He's like me in a way they aren't." Family, to him as well it seems, sticks together no matter what. "Or maybe it's just because he's untouched by the abandonment, or because he stayed when I needed someone to." Flashes of Tommy, head resting on his thigh and face relaxed in peace, come, unbidden, to his mind. Tommy needed him as much as he needed Tommy, he thinks, and it's nice to have that equality.

Puffy tilts her head, considering. Then, she smiles. "I'm glad you've found someone like that. Tommy sounds wonderful." Her expression turns playful, and, as she slides the notebook off her lap, she stands. "Let's see if we can't keep him around, then?"

It's a joke. A bit of a dark one, or maybe just an inappropriate one for a therapist to make to someone who clearly seems to have some kind of abandonment issues.

Wilbur still smiles, despite the tiny bit of fear her comment inspires. He stands, as well, extending a hand for her to shake. "Much obliged."

Despite the sudden spike of frantic desperation to Tommy's actions and the everlasting flow of cases with no tangible culprits, work slows. Wilbur finds himself lingering in the break room, seeking out Quackity's desk—which is typically empty; even if work is slow for them, it doesn't mean it is for everybody—or saving Tommy from his furrowed browed-glare at his terminal.

Ever since Capitol Park, he's been more determined than ever. He searched through the old reports until he found the officers who were the first responders to the so-called break-in, when Tubbo had been shot and supposedly dismantled. Wilbur had been there for that discussion, looming menacingly over Tommy's shoulder whenever the officers scoffed at him.

That hadn't revealed anything out of the ordinary. They shot him a few times, despite his hands raised in surrender, because the nephew had pointed him out as the instigator. After further prodding, they, irritated, insisted that the thing was a pile of scrap. No artificial heartbeat under their hands.

"It's almost like he came back from the dead," Tommy had muttered under his breath, eyes narrowed. "Like Jesus."

Wilbur had scoffed, but a single look at his partner confirmed that he wasn't, in fact, joking. "Android Jesus."

They interviewed the nephew as well, and it had only taken a few minutes with him to decide that he was an asshole. He was short-tempered and arrogant, deeming their questions nothing but a waste of time. It was clear—from the way he shifted from foot to foot—that Tommy was just as annoyed as he was, but his face had revealed nothing.

That interview also yielded very little. It was obvious, from the nephew's bitter tone and facial tics, that he had been jealous of Tubbo. He spoke of his uncle's 'delusions' and how he had always treated the thing as if it were family. As if it were a living thing.

Tommy and Wilbur had exchanged looks at that. At least it was all but confirmed that Tubbo didn't kill him. Why would someone willingly give up that kind of life? Being treated as an equal? Taking care of and being taken care of in equal measure?

Today, as slow and boring as it has been so far, has revealed one positive; it's just as slow and boring for Quackity.

"Y'know, I can't believe you guys lost the remote to this thing," Q says, leaning over one of the tables. All four of them are gathered in the break room, scattered around and doing whatever it is to entertain themselves. Tommy is poking around in the fridge, nose wrinkling every time he comes across something he doesn't like while Charlie looks over his shoulder, running a rapid and low commentary on what he sees. "This is like purgatory or something. Stuck watching the same shitty news channel."

Wilbur glances over his shoulder. It's the same news anchor he's been seeing for years; a familiar if not frustrating face. "Hey, I've been dealing with him much longer than you have. If anyone should have the right to complain, it's me." He frowns, and then, to be safe, he adds, "Respect your elders."

Quackity cackles, head thrown back, like Wilbur was both hoping and expecting. "How much power is this station draining on this thing? Can we even turn it off?" He pushes off the table, standing on his tiptoes to peer at the screen.

Wilbur takes a sip of his coffee, relishing in the heat that seeps into his tired hands. "There's a plug," he says once he's swallowed, pointing out aimlessly with the hand holding the cup. "I'm pretty sure they unplug it each night."

Quackity mutters something that sounds an awful lot like a string of obscenities as he inspects the cord, but Wilbur isn't paying attention. No, his focus is caught on the screen

itself, as the anchor's familiar face fades away to a press conference. A banner runs underneath the footage, declaring this as a sudden press conference with a Cyberlife representative. "What the fuck?"

All eyes turn toward the TV.

"—this has been a sudden problem that we at Cyberlife could have never anticipated, but, since its discovery, we are doing everything we possibly can to fix the issue," an older gentleman with a nervous sweat dripping down the side of his face says. His cheeks are inflamed with an unflattering red, but he powers through what must be embarrassment. "In the meantime, Cyberlife urges the public not to fall into this trap. Androids are not capable of emotions or pain. They are *not* alive. Deviancy, as we've taken to calling it, is a product of some sudden mutation in the code. It's a malfunction we will fix."

"What the fuck?" Tommy echoes, sounding less surprised and more outraged.

The man shifts, discreetly unfolding a piece of crumpled-up paper. "We are working with the Detroit police on this matter, but it's important that you be watching your androids for signs of deviancy. The appearance of emotions is the most important and prominent trait, as well as a change in language usage. If your android suddenly starts using words such as 'want' or 'like' or other feeling words, please report it to the authorities. Other signs include the appearance of care for all types of living things, such as animals, plants, or people."

"That's our fucking list!"

"Again, this is nothing to be worried about. Cyberlife will take care of this matter as quickly as we can, but, in the meantime, be on the lookout. And please remember, these are machines. They are not capable of the feelings they emulate, no matter how realistic they might present." He pauses, letting his final words sink in. "Thank you."

The gaggle of reporters explodes into a flurry of noise, but Wilbur can barely think over the beat of his own heart. And, as he glances around the room, he sees his own feelings mirrored in twisted expressions.

"You're fucking kidding me," Quackity sneers.

"Does he—does he actually think this will *help*?" Wilbur demands, a low thrum of horror filling him. "This is going to cause a panic." He thinks of the androids that will be tossed out after this broadcast, destroyed or left to rot in that trash heap Tommy was talking about. How many people would rather get rid of a ticking time bomb rather than try to defuse it? "Not to mention the stress this will put on deviants, encouraging more assault cases."

Tommy shuts the fridge door with a slam that rattles the entire machine. His LED blinks red. "How could they do that without consulting us? This is our case. *Ours*." He scowls, glaring up at the sweaty, sweaty man as he stumbles his way through answers to the reporter's questions. "This is fucking outrageous."

"Shut up, you disgusting little man," Quackity says to the TV. He's still so near to it, and he reaches out, finger jabbing into the TV screen. "I wish there was a way to *shut him up*. Could

we, like, hack the TV or something?"

Hack the—

Wilbur blinks. "Hey, aren't you able to access security footage when we investigate a crime scene?" he asks Tommy.

"Yeah," Tommy says, a furrow in his brow. "I'm able to remotely connect to any device and —*Oh.*"

Quackity grins, something sharp and feral. Then, he crouches down, hands patting his shoulders with a strange new energy. "Hop on, buddy."

There's only a moment of stillness before some answering grin splits his face. Tommy rushes forward, sliding his legs onto Q's shoulders and holding his head as he stands up. It's wobbly at first—Wilbur doesn't know how much androids weigh, but he imagines it can't be anything less than substantial—but they hold. With hands braced on Tommy's thighs, he holds him level with the TV.

Wilbur watches in vague interest as Tommy presses a bare hand to the TV. He closes his eyes, LED blinking yellow as the TV screen begins to glitch. Bars of color flicker across the screen and then, as if by magic, the channel switches. Instead of the annoyingly familiar news channel, the screen now displays the shitty soap opera Tommy and Wilbur have taken to watching.

For a moment, nobody moves, save for the characters on the screen. Then, Quackity lets out a whoop.

"You're so cool," Charlie breathes out, awe and reverence and genuine affection crossing his expression. Blue tinges Tommy's ears, but nobody has time to revel in it as Quackity marches out into the precinct.

"Hey everybody!" he calls out. From where he's standing, Wilbur can just make out their silhouette. The bullpen quiets. "Tommy just fixed the TV problem!"

There's another moment of harsh silence. And then the room explodes with cheers.

After another few sessions with Puffy—she recommended at least two sessions a week, after he accidentally revealed some of his darker thoughts in a particularly emotional session—she had, foolishly in his opinion, suggested leaving little notes around the house to combat some of his more persistent negative thoughts. She said that long-term exposure to thoughts such as that had been slowly wearing down his self-esteem and that, coupled with the trauma that he still refused to expand upon as well as other factors, had led him to where he was now.

"They don't have to be anything big or important," she had explained when he expressed his annoyance and confusion. "Just little reminders that, at the end of the way, bad thoughts are

just that. They don't define you as a person. And I think it's important that you have real, physical reminders that you aren't alone anymore. That you are still resilient, even if you have to fight to get through it."

And yeah, okay. When she puts it like that, it wasn't an absolutely terrible idea. But the suggestions she makes always sound better in the office than out of them. They're nice to think about and imagine doing, but far too daunting in reality.

Wilbur rips off the note from the pad and crumples it up into a tiny ball. With a frustrated noise, he lets it slip from his fingers, joining the growing pile that litters the unoccupied side of the table. He presses the pen back to the pad, only to end up ripping the point through the paper when nothing comes to mind.

The problem is that, well, he's extraordinarily shitty at thinking good thoughts. Especially about himself. And, well, to put it quite bluntly, he feels stupid doing this exercise. He feels stupid that his own, shitty brain needs reassurance from itself. And, even though he's alone in the kitchen, Wilbur still feels the sting of heat in his cheeks.

He's been at this for nearly thirty minutes now, and the only thing he has to show for it is the discarded notes scattered around. Some of them have fallen off, staring up innocuously at him from the floor while he barely resists the urge to rip out his own hair.

There's the subtle shifting sound, the faintest squeak of springs in an ancient couch. Wilbur ignores it the best he can, despite the way his ears are hyper-focused on the slightest noise. Instead, he shifts forward, biting his lip as he stares, vacantly, at the pad in front of him.

Puffy told him to write from the heart. That, because they were his and his alone, it didn't matter how formal or informal. That he should write them as he wants, so he does. He tunes out his brain and scribbles something down just a little too hard, paper shuddering under his force. And, when he sits back, he's left with a note in his nearly unreadable chicken scratch: 'Stop being a fuck-up'.

Wilbur frowns. While it's helpful information, he doesn't think it's quite what Puffy wanted. Not conducive to a positive and growth-centered mindset, as she's taken to say often. He's convinced she only says it as frequently as she does because it always makes him scoff, and because Puffy, for all her helpful advice, is a sadist.

He tears off this note as well and lets it join its fallen brethren. In the other room, Tommy shifts again, head popping up from the couch with bleary eyes and a truly heinous bedhead. Ever since his odd, fevered behavior at Capitol Park and the long nap that came after it, he's been sleeping with regularity. Wilbur has no idea if it's actually necessary to his functioning now or not, but he's taken to doing it in the place of that weird stasis mode.

"Morning," Wilbur says, despite the wintry, late afternoon sun filtering in through the open windows. Tommy grunts back at him, and he smiles. He taps the tip of his pen against the note and watches the small ink blot it creates. "Sleeping beauty."

Tommy hauls himself off the couch, leaving the thin blanket draped over his shoulders like an unimpressive cape. "What are you doing?" he mumbles. Without waiting for an answer, he

shuffles forward on unwilling legs and stops only a few feet behind him. His bleary eyes narrow. "Oh, are you doing that therapy thing?"

Wilbur grunts in affirmation, resisting the knee-jerk urge to cover the notepad, despite its empty pages. Instead, he stands up, gathering all the rejects and ferrying them to the trash. "Yeah. It's going about as well as you'd expect."

When he turns back around, at least content with his clean-up, Tommy is sitting in his vacated chair, pen in hand. His tongue is slightly sticking out the side of his mouth in an almost comically unrealistic way—the price of learning mannerisms from cartoons and jesting detectives, he supposes. Wilbur watches as he, with quick hands, writes out a couple notes. "There," he says, sitting back and looking proud. "I started you off."

"What did you write?" Wilbur leans over his shoulder, but Tommy lunges forward, protectively cupping his treasure.

"Not so fast," he says, eyes narrowed and a grin tilting his mouth. Wilbur rolls his eyes and brings a hand up to his head, fully intent on further mussing up his wild curls. Tommy ducks under his hand, though, and skitters off to the bathroom with an air of mad glee. He's left to follow, reluctant amusement curling his lips.

When he enters the bathroom, it's to the sight of Tommy leaning against the sink, pressing those same bright pink notes against the outer fringes of the mirror. He steps back once they're up, allowing Wilbur to let his eyes roam over the three of them. '*You matter*' declares the one in the top right corner while the one below it displays '*Q and I care about you*' in atypically messy writing. The final note, the only one on the left side, reads '*I'm proud of you*' with a shaky smiley face.

Wilbur has to bite down hard on his bottom lip to keep the sappy smile off his face. "They're alright," he says and hopes that Tommy ignores just how wobbly his voice sounds.

He does, thankfully, instead turning to face Wilbur with a neutral curiosity. "How was therapy today?" he asks, like he has every single time Wilbur gets back from a session, with the same level of enthusiasm and interest. "Are you liking it?"

Dumb question. Therapy feels like taking a peeler and dragging it across your forearm while the therapist watches, eyes lingering on the bloody, exposed mess with a careful control of their emotions as they continue to poke and prod, gently, at the throbbing wound. It hurts and it's uncomfortable and he's constantly, consistently pushed out of his comfort zone.

But it's also getting better, little by little. Even after only five sessions, some of the lesser pains have faded from a sharp stab to a dull ache, like pressing on a yellowing bruise. It still isn't pleasant, sure, but it's manageable. Puffy, somehow, makes him feel *manageable*.

"Liking and therapy do not belong in the same sentence," he says instead, eyes lingering on the bright pink pages littering his mirror. Props to Tommy for picking a spot that he's forced to look at, multiple times a day. He's sure that was the intention. "But it's... not entirely awful."

Tommy grins, and he somehow manages not to look smug about it. "Yeah? That's good." Almost absent-minded, he reaches out, running the pads of his fingers against the notes, as if to ensure their position. "Want to elaborate?"

Well, he doesn't. Honestly, that's all he does in therapy; he relays a lot and then, when Puffy tilts her head ever so slightly, he elaborates. It's good for him, she claims. Putting complex thoughts and emotions into words isn't easy, but it will help him learn to define and pinpoint all of his emotions.

But it just feels like consistently working out a previously unused muscle. Sore and aching, with no improvement in sight.

"It's—It just is. It is a thing that I do now, twice a week, and it's hard and difficult, but I keep on doing it because—" he falters, eyes darting away. He's already made it abundantly clear just how much he cares about Tommy—the lengths he'd go to for him. He isn't keen on repeating it. "Because it's good for me, or whatever." He shakes his head. "It's like... rehab for sinners or something."

Tommy laughs, crowding his space until their shoulders knock together. "Rehab for sinners?"

Wilbur shrugs, heat climbing up his neck and along the tips of his ears. "I don't know. It feels like it. I was a shit person and I still kind of am, but I'm working to be better."

And working he is. Puffy walked him through several techniques meant to calm him whenever he felt like lashing out, and he's taken to practicing them even when he was feeling mildly irritated. He's sick of his words hurting the people he cares about, though. He has been for a while, but now he's finally doing something about it.

That feeling alone is enough to carry him through some of the worst, most vulnerable conversations.

Wilbur focuses on the curve of his nail, on his overgrown cuticles, and he picks at his nailbeds. He swallows around the lump in his throat, knowing but not craving what needs to happen next. "I know I haven't really... expressed this in any... verbal way," he starts, like an old truck engine sputtering a few times. "But, uh, I'm really—" he licks his lips. "I'm really sorry about how I was when we first met."

Tommy looks up, blinking. Wilbur has to look away.

"I was a complete dick. I was... hurting and I took it out on you, like I so often do, apparently." Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Tommy smile. "And it wasn't fair, and I'm really sorry for it." He takes a deep breath, nails picking more insistently at his skin as his pulse flutters. "I'm especially sorry for—" he clears his throat. "For when I strangled you. I... no explanation is enough for that, and I promise you it, or anything like it, will ever happen again. I hope that you—" he falters, mind casting back to Puffy's words. "I hope that you can forgive me, but I understand if you can't."

The silence, other than the drip of that fucking leaky faucet, is deafening. And, after a tense moment, he forces himself to look.

But Tommy is smiling when he raises his eyes, the inner corners of his eyebrows angled up. "I forgave you for that a long time ago, Wil."

"Well, you shouldn't have. I haven't given you an apology until now."

Tommy shrugs, eyes lingering on the notes that crowd his mirror. "Maybe not. But I don't think forgiveness is really a choice, y'know?" Then, with that, he grins and lightly shoulder checks Wilbur on the way out.

Chapter End Notes

Here's a chapter all about therapy written by me, a psych major planning on going into therapy. Don't know how realistic it is, but hey.

the stuff of dreams (and nightmares)

Chapter Summary

Tommy finds out what it really means to dream.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Thirty: The Stuff of Dreams (and Nightmares)

Like a damn bursting after his first time—the hungry, inky void and the cracked red wall—Tommy dreams more often than not. And while he still feels uneasy using such a word to describe the strange visions that flicker behind his eyes, there truly is no better word to describe them.

He dreams of forests swaying in the breeze, and of old crumbled homes with ivy growing through the stone. He dreams he's standing in a field of weeds and that his reluctant hands keep burying themselves in the ground, fingers wrapping around thin roots and pulling them out. He dreams he's buried in a coffin too small, or sometimes there's no coffin at all. Just his blue-covered hands pressing against the wall of dirt above him until it fills his mouth.

And while he may have found himself wondering about the nature of dreams in the past, he finds them unexplainably odd. They don't have the same strange importance that many stories tend to place on them nor do they stick to the rules of reality. They jump time, they jump place, and, occasionally, they jump people; Tommy finds himself walking around in someone else's body.

He's resistant to using the word, but it's becoming harder and harder to deny. These are dreams. These are what humans experience when they sleep, and they're what Tommy experiences when he shuts his eyes. That feels important, somehow. That Tommy and humanity share such an odd characteristic. But it makes his brain go fuzzy in that achingly familiar way, so he's taken to ignoring it.

When he first started dreaming, he considered, albeit briefly, keeping a journal. It was something that humans often did, although, for what purpose, Tommy is still a little perplexed. His reasons would probably sit on the edge of scientific curiosity and a general dread of system malfunction. It hadn't escaped his notice that these dreams—and sleep as a whole—only occurred after his brief and unexplainable fever.

But, in the end, Tommy hesitated.

While Dream wasn't often inclined to check his internal footage or any of the files he kept tucked away in his brain, something itchy crawled under his skin at the thought of him stumbling across this information. His dreams don't appear as footage—he had checked after one sweat-inducing nightmare—so the only log of them would be whatever notes he kept on it.

So, ultimately, he forewent keeping track of his dream. Instead, he experienced them, pondered over them in the early morning, and then let them fade into non-existence with the morning haze.

Niki, too, it seems, had been unable to form a solid opinion when he told her about this new development. She had stared at him for a long time, a furrow between her brows as some unreadable emotion warped her features. "That's—" she had said, at a complete loss for words. "What do you think of it?"

Tommy had come to her hoping for some sort of insight, for some opinion to cling to in these turbulent times. He hadn't expected the question to be turned back on him, nor did he have any coherent answer. He still doesn't, if he's being completely honest, but the pure novelty has worn off some. Now, it's just another fact of life.

"Well," he had said, because she was expecting an answer, and Tommy hated to let people down. "It gives me something to do at night, I suppose."

She had laughed, something like relief pulling at the corner of her eyes. And, although she hadn't given him that odd expression again, he sometimes caught that same unreadable emotion in her eyes when she thought he wasn't looking.

They had talked about their dreams then, and Tommy kept to explaining some of the lesser evils. His field of torn-up weeds and even the one where dirt inevitably filled his tired lungs. She had made a face when he described them, and it only confirmed his decision to leave out some of... more questionable ones.

Because, alongside dreams of corruption and nature and death, Tommy dreams of Tubbo.

He dreams of Tubbo torn apart in some junkyard, pieces of him scattered amongst the mud and the trash and the other broken parts of dead androids.

He dreams of Tubbo and him standing on top of a tall roof, an equal distance apart as they stare each other down. Rain flattens their hair, drips into their eyes, and the gravel on the roof shifts under their feet as they meet in the middle, nails scraping at flesh.

But, most disconcerting of all, he dreams of that day in the kitchens, when he was pinned against the counter by a knife in his flesh. He dreams of hands cawing at his thirium pump, pulling at his LED, stripping him of everything that marks him as a machine. It's always Tubbo's hands, a grim sort of determination on his face as he pulls and tears flesh from his body. There's always an apology in his eyes and on his lips, in a shaky, whispered voice.

Sometimes, as the skin retracts under the force and as his vision flickers, he'll see Dream standing in the doorway, watching. His mask is unyielding and his expression underneath is

unknown, but Tommy can always feel the disappointment dripping off him as Tommy is stripped of everything making him a machine.

He always wakes up from those dreams with breath stolen from his throat and pressure prickling at the corner of his eyes. He always takes a few moments to collect himself, fingers seeking out his burning LED, his thumping thirium pump, the scars underneath his skin.

Tommy doesn't know what to make of those dreams, at all. He often shoves them far away into some forgotten, shadowy part of his mind.

But, even as the dreams fade from his mind as more hazy sunlight spills into the room, he can't shake the looming sense of melancholy. Of despair and an evasive sense of finality.

December 8th, 2038

8:38 PM

"No, no, no," Wilbur says through peals of laughter, one palm half-smothering the smile that bleeds through his spread fingers. "That's not how it went."

Phil sits across the table from him, a bowl of soup placed precariously in front of him, if only because of the zest in his gesturing hands. "It was," he insists, voice lilted with the fond smile that lights up his face. "It absolutely was, Wil. I was an adult, and you were a child. And anyway, I have a better memory than you."

Tommy smiles down at the worn table, its not-so-glossy finish illuminated by the extra lights strung along the top of the walls. Decorating had been a lesson in patience—how the *fuck* do Christmas lights get so tangled, and how can he prevent that in the future—but the house looks much better for it. And the small smile on Wilbur's face as he looked over the mountain of boxes pulled down from his attic hadn't hurt. As far as he can tell, it's been a while since Wilbur's properly celebrated, and Tommy's pleased to be a part of it.

When he looks back up, the tips of Wilbur's ears are already turning that familiar, endearing red, despite his stubborn fingers rubbing at the color. "You can't use your age as a defense!"

Tommy and Techno share twin amused looks as Phil comically throws his hands up in the air. "Why not? You and Tech use it against me every goddamn day of my life."

Things have not been easy, but they have been manageable. Now, however, it's easy to forget. When Wilbur is red in the face from laughter and embarrassment in equal parts, and when Phil looks younger without the familial and work stress weighing him down. When Techno forgets about the hatred apparently deeply ingrained and automatically shares exasperated but fond looks with an android.

"That's not how it was. I was never *that* clumsy," Wilbur says to Tommy, face quickly schooled into something approaching seriousness. "Don't listen to him. He's a fucking liar."

"I dunno, Wil," Techno says, and he doesn't miss the significance of that nickname. Of the fond tone he says it in, his usual monotone forgone for something warmer. "I kind of remember you and your gangly limbs getting into trouble. And something happening, maybe around Christmas time?"

More color blooms, spreading across his cheeks. "Nope, no. I don't remember anything like that happening."

"Oh really? You didn't trip over one of the gifts and tackle the Christmas tree then?" Wilbur presses his lips together and very resolutely shakes his head 'no'. "And we didn't have to pick shards of broken, antique ornaments out of your skin?"

He lasts for about twelve seconds—brow twitching the entire time—before he breaks. "Okay, first of all, those were fucking dollar store ornaments. You know this man—" he points violently at Phil, who's shoving a spoonful of soup into his mouth.—"did not care about Christmas until you came along." Surprisingly, Techno averts his eyes. There's nothing as damning as color to his skin, but his body language is, slowly, becoming more obvious to Tommy. "And also, the glass didn't even touch my skin. It embedded in my socks and shirt," he finishes with a smug finality.

Techno rolls his eyes. "Like that matters."

And Tommy can only shake his head—both at their antics and at the soft, pillowy warmth surrounding them in the kitchen. The table digs into his elbows, and the sweet, cloying scent of the soup they had made together—with a little bit of Tommy's help. They settle into a comfortable silence with only the sound of spoons scraping the bottom of bowls for company.

"Speaking of Christmas," Phil says, slowly, picking up the frayed thread of conversation smoothly. "Can we safely assume... that it won't be like... past years?"

Tommy forgets, for how quickly Wilbur and he fell into their respective slots, that Phil and Techno still don't understand him. They understand his struggles in a general sense, and, where Tommy ultimately saw a man crushed under the weight of his own self-isolation, they only saw a man who refused to pick himself up.

It's only more obvious, in the careful tone Phil talks, that he still thinks of Wilbur as one of the glass ornaments he crushed in the unfortunate fall: delicate and breakable, something to be treated with soft touches. And while it's true that he needs to be handled with a more gentle hand, sometimes, Wilbur hates pity more than anything.

And Phil has only ever looked at him with pity.

"That's the plan," Tommy answers for him, because they've talked about this. They've talked it through while stringing up lights, balancing colorful wreaths on the front of doors, heaving down a Christmas tree from its home in the attic.

Next to him, Wilbur silently picks at the skin around his fingernails. Tommy automatically wraps a hand around his wrist, tugging his hands away from each other before he can do too

much damage. He knows that Wil has been working on that with Puffy, but some habits are too deeply ingrained. "Yeah," he agrees, settling his hands down on his knees. "Plus—" he grins, and it only looks a little unhinged. "It's baby's first Christmas."

Tommy rolls his eyes.

Despite society's apparent love for the holiday, he has yet to make up his mind. Most of the shitty Hallmark movies sing its praises and for that alone, he almost wants to hate it. He's watched good-tempered city girls find the true meaning of Christmas and busy businessmen learn to relax. He's seen small towns with picturesque snow on the tops of roofs, paired with smoking chimneys.

He's seen it all and more, as Wilbur joyously puts them on, only to spit out scathing remarks about their inadequacy.

And they are bad, admittedly, but it's clear that Wil *does* like Christmas. It's buried under his bittersweet glances towards Fundy's closed room and in his blank stares at the Christmas tree in the corner. It's still there, though, and Tommy is looking forward to gently coaxing more of that enjoyment out.

"Sure," Tommy says, for lack of anything else to say. Phil takes a few cautious sips of his soup, dabbing at his mouth with a napkin when he's done because he's apparently a polite gentleman. "Although I don't really understand the importance of it, other than... I dunno, whatever it is that Hallmark is trying to sell."

"Christmas cards," Wilbur inputs helpfully.

Across from him, Techno leans forward, bracketing his bowl with his elbows as he rests his head on his laced fingers. "It's celebration for celebration's sake, and propaganda to fuel the ever-chugging machine that is capitalism."

"It's actually got a long and convoluted backstory, but it's not really worth getting into," Phil says with a shake of his head.

Wilbur also leans forward, pressing one of his forearms against Tommy's. "You don't have to understand it to enjoy it." This close, Tommy can really appreciate how much better he looks. Color has returned to his skin; regular meals have returned some of his lost fat and semi-regular sleep has lightened the circles under his eyes. "And enjoy it you will. We have a shit tone of crazy traditions."

"Oh?" Tommy perks up, glancing between the three of them.

But Phil just says his head again, a fond smile upturning his lips. "Well, no more than your average family." He shrugs. "Most of them revolve around food. Techno always makes mashed potatoes from his second crop of potatoes. They ripen just in time."

"As, yes. The average family," Techno says with a wry twist to his lip. "Just gloss over the Lord of Misrule. Sure."

"The Lord of Misrule?" Several web searches pop up automatically, but Tommy blinks them away.

"Despite what Phil may say," Wilbur says with a nostalgic grin. "He actually is quite the history buff. And he's obsessed with the history of Christmas and some of the older traditions, including the Lord of Misrule."

Phil settles the spoon back in his bowl and launches right into an explanation. "Basically, during holiday celebrations, kings often appointed one commoner to be the Lord of Misrule. They presided over the Feast of Fools and the general holiday revelry. For us, it works relatively the same."

Tommy is, slowly, learning how to appreciate Phil. He's got this air of wisdom to him—when he isn't being a condescending ass—and he's a veritable well of interesting information, despite the fact that Tommy has the whole internet at his fingertips. Talking about a subject that interests him transforms his whole demeanor—eyes lit up, mouth curved into a smile.

"To simplify it, we make this—this traditional cake together on Christmas Eve, and we bake a coin into it. Whoever gets the coin in their slice of cake gets to be the Lord of Misrule and plans the activities for the next day."

"Oh, shit," Tommy says, genuinely. "That sounds cool."

Phil nods. "We used to decorate together as well, but that stopped when they moved out. Then we all had our own places to decorate..." he trails off, tilting his head back as he glances at the decorations scattered about. At the bells hanging over the kitchen sink and at the stockings hanging on the wall above the TV—two ridiculously fancy, embroidered ones with Wilbur and Fundy's names on it, and a third store-bought one with Tommy's name scribbled on it Wilbur's shitty chicken scratch.

"Yeah, well," Wilbur says, carrying the conversation before it can stray towards dangerous territory. "Tommy helped me this year."

Phil smiles, and it only looks a little thin. "You did well."

"Thanks." Tommy ducks his head, staring instead at the bowls arranged on the table. A gooey tiredness infuses in his veins, and it makes him cave in on himself like a melted marshmallow.

A pleasant silence falls over the table, born not out of uncomfortableness but out of an exhaustion of conversation. Techno stirs his spoon in his soup, and Wilbur traces a shallow groove in the wood. Eventually, his fingers turn restless, tapping against the table.

"Can we talk?" Wilbur asks suddenly, drawing every eye in the room to him with the crack in his voice. Something in his face—the raw, bitten look to his lip, the evasiveness of his eyes, the sudden increase in his nervous ticks—tells Tommy everything he needs to know about what is going to come out of his mouth next. "Seriously?"

Tommy watches as something in Phil seems to shift. His posture smooths out, and he sets his spoon down in his empty bowl, filled with just a little bit of pooling soup. Already, the youth is drained from his face, replaced with a serious weariness that exposes his wrinkles. "What is it?"

Wilbur fiddles with his fingers, and Tommy watches him like a hawk.

He knows that Wilbur and Puffy had run through several scenarios—so he could know what to expect, and so that he would have the words to express his thoughts—and he had also heard Wilbur running over it under his breath as they wandered, aimlessly, through the grocery store.

And yet, now that they're actually here—now that he's actually faced with his loss of control over the whole situation—it seems to be much more difficult.

"It's nothing... bad," he says quickly after a brief glance up towards their faces, at the way they had quickly schooled from happy and carefree to something much more controlled. "I just—I think I should tell you about something that has been going on in my life recently. Something that you guys should be a—that I want you to be—" Wilbur makes a face. "—to be a part of. If you'd like."

"...Okay," Phil says, a furrow to his brow.

Tommy leans over when he sees Wilbur waver and gives him a single nudge with his elbow. A single push towards the words he's struggling with.

"I started going to therapy," he blurts out, eyes still glued to a faded scratch in the table. Across from him, the spoon falls from Techno's hand and lands in his half-full bowl with a clang. "I've been to a few sessions, and it's been—" Wilbur sucks in a breath. "Well, it's been alright. I've been going. I've been *trying*. And I think that's all that can be asked of me."

Silence encompasses them. Wilbur is still too nervous to look up, so Tommy does it for him. Glancing away from the wood speckled with dots of soup, he notes the raw, unhidden emotion in Techno's face. It's as plain as the day—eyebrows raised, mouth hanging a little bit slack, eyes wide and shining with something that looks a lot like hope.

He reluctantly tears his eyes away from Techno only to find something entirely different on Phil's face. It seems to take longer to register—shock and surprise and simply incomprehension displayed across his features—but when it does finally...

His face lights up, eyes wet with quickly forming tears and mouth curved into a blinding smile.

"Wil," he breathes out, hope and prayer and reverence all in one nickname. At the sound, Wilbur glances up, bottom lip pulled between his teeth. Something in him—the tension caught in his shoulders, maybe—softens when he sees the blatant relief written in his face. "That's—" his voice catches, and he reaches across the table, meeting Wilbur's hand halfway. His weathered thumb caresses the top of it in gentle strokes. "That's great."

Wilbur doesn't even bother fighting his careful smile. "Yeah?"

"Of course. I'm so proud of you."

Wilbur swallows and presses his free palm against his mouth to hide the curve of his smile. "Thank you," he says in whispered relief. Techno still stewes in his own disbelief, but thankfully, Wilbur doesn't seem to notice his absence in the conversation. "Puffy, my, uh, therapist, thinks that it would be best if I involved you two. You're both a—a part of my support system as well as—" *part of the problem*. Or at least, something that served only to exacerbate the problem. Still, he fumbles for some kinder way to put it. "—there's just so much shit between us."

Techno seems to recover—if only partly—and his jaw shuts with an audible click.

"She thinks that it would be best to—uh, if you're comfortable with it—um, well, she called it a 'facilitated conversation'—" he explains, even going so far as to use air quotes. "Basically, we'd, uh, come in together or in pairs and sort of... air our grievances in a 'constructive way' and with her as a mediator." His fingers smooth over the raw skin around his nails, but he stops himself from picking at it. "I think... we can't keep pretending that everything is normal. We can't keep ignoring the cracks in our foundation or pretend that the duct tape we slapped on them is a sufficient fix." He pauses and makes a face that Tommy is quickly beginning to associate with him recalling Puffy's wording. "We need to rebuild the foundation entirely."

"Whatever you need Wil," Phil says, sounding soft and fond and so damn proud. It makes Tommy want to grin.

Techno, wordlessly, nods his agreement.

"Okay," Wilbur says, wiping underneath his eyes despite their dryness. "Okay. Yeah, I'll call Puffy tomorrow and forward her availability."

After that, their conversation dissolves. Their dishes, having been emptied or the food inside gone cold, are put into the sink for later tending. Wilbur picks out another truly horrendous Christmas rom-com—"Oh, come on!" Wilbur had said when Techno groaned his protest. "It's a classic! You know you love it."—and they watch through the entire thing.

Shortly after, they wish the rest of their party goodbye at the door. Phil trails down the steps with one last grinning farewell, but Techno lingers on their doorstep, Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows. Wilbur—either not sensing the atmosphere surrounding his brother or simply too tired to deal with it—retreats back to the couch.

When Tommy tries to join him with one last nod, Techno catches his sleeve. Already, Phil is clambering into his own car, the door slamming shut behind him as the engine revs. Behind him, the TV clicks back on, noise blaring and the flickering lights casting funny shadows on Techno's face. Tommy tilts his head in a wordless question.

And, as the sky is obscured by dark clouds and a gentle, familiar snow starts to fall on frost-covered grass, Techno gives him a single, tight nod.

No words are exchanged. No words are *needed*.

Tommy smiles as Techno descends the stairs, hand tightening around the frozen railing. He gives him one last glance over his shoulder as he trails down the driveway, and Tommy shuts the door behind him as he turns back inside.

When Tommy first opens his eyes to a surrounding forest full of bare trees and a wooden pathway surrounded by an icy pond, he thinks it's just another dream. There have been so many recently, with an alarming frequency, that, when he turns on his heel to observe it, he startles when he lays his eyes on the candle-lit windows of the community house.

He allows himself a moment to stare, at the flickering lights and at the layer of frost coating the glass. Time, it always seems, has no place in this scene, this preserved memory. And yet, everything about this place screams winter, down to the abandoned, bare gardens.

Tommy feels something he imagines could be loss for the plants he never got the chance to see. He wonders if they ever did grow—everything here seems to work so weirdly, familiar in a dream-like way—and what Dream did with them.

He doesn't get to marvel long. Shortly after he delightedly discovers his breath fogging in the air—a luxury he isn't usually afforded—the front door swings open.

Dream stands in the doorway, silhouetted by the golden light as he so often is. Even without the mask, his face is obscured in shadows, and he doesn't even offer a weak greeting. He simply steps back, allowing the light to hit Tommy, and pushes the door open wider.

Something clenches in Tommy's gut, but he takes the wordless command for what it is and obeys.

It's much warmer inside, a fire crackling away from somewhere Tommy can't place. As he steps inside, he shakes the cold from his hair and instinctively wipes his boots on a doormat that doesn't exist. He only pauses when he leans down, fingers already untying the knots in his laces.

There is no pile of awaiting shoes here. Just shoddy chests coated with dust and perpetually burning candles that dance, ominously, in the windows. Tommy swallows down the odd sense of *wrongness* and walks across the room, taking a seat on one of the many abandoned beds.

Dream doesn't join him immediately. Instead, his hand lingers on the brass doorknob, face turned towards the outdoors. And, when he does eventually shut the door with nothing more than a whisper, it's only to linger near the base of the stairs. He takes a deep breath, and it's unnervingly loud in the thick silence.

"Your productivity has dropped significantly, lately," Dream says with all the finality of a guillotine falling. "And so has the quality of your recent reports."

Dream doesn't like excuses. He hardly likes explanations, although he often acknowledges their reluctant necessity. What he wants, more than either of the two, is results. Silence and changed behavior rather than meritless words.

Dream doesn't like excuses, but Tommy still finds them bubbling to the surface anyway. They rise with the panic building in his chest, with the sudden itchiness beneath his skin, and the restlessness of his stationary knee. He taps a single finger against the offending limb and hopes it's enough to quell whatever it is that distracts him.

It doesn't, but he still shoves down the excuses before they can slip out past grit teeth. "It has," he admits with a shameful dip of his head. "We figure there are a lot of cases to get to, but that there is little information to be gained for most of them. Our limited time is better spent on larger cases. The ones involving Tubbo and the revolution."

"Revolution." His lips curl underneath the rim of his mask. If Tommy focuses, he can just see a hint of freckles adorning his pale skin. It feels startlingly familiar, even if he can't place why. "If that's what you want to call it."

Tommy finds himself simultaneously bristling and shrinking under the hefty weight of Dream's disappointment. It's not that he *wants* to call it a revolution, but at this point, it's impossible to deny that this is what it is.

A revolution, a rebellion, an uprising. There are many names, but all of them are apt. It would be foolish to regard this as anything other than that. To belittle the movement and underestimate Tubbo, his fated foe.

"You *should be* focusing on every single case that comes in," Dream says, the air around him tense with anticipation. He's like a trap ready to close around Tommy's leg, so he sticks to silence. "You *should be* working every single case, sniffing out clues like the good little bloodhound you are. That you're *supposed* to be."

He pushes off the stairs, footsteps dauntingly slow, and comes to a stop right in front of Tommy. He reaches out, fingers pressing in against Tommy's jaw. His breath stills in his chest as Dream tilts his head both ways in a moment reminiscent of Sam. "But you're not. Instead, you're focusing on your *detective*."

It takes everything in him to keep his artificial muscles from tensing up. From giving some physical tell that would damn both him and Wilbur. He manages it, if only barely, as well as his tenuous hold on the serene blue of his LED.

Dream's fingers tense around his chin, pinching into the thin skin until Tommy feels it retract. "Too much time catering to his whims. Too much time getting something broken into a semblance of working order." This time, he isn't quite strong enough to stop his twitch. Dream's fingers pinch harder around his chin—a warning. "One could think that you like it. That you like playing *house* with him."

Tommy forces his breath to come in a consistent, deep rhythm.

"Of course, that isn't the case. Right, Tommy?"

It only then occurs to him that he doesn't *need* to breathe. That Dream wouldn't think anything if his chest were to stay still permanently. It seems unthinkable. The rise and fall of his chest is a comfort, and to hold himself still only causes the panic to build faster.

Tommy nods.

"Of course," Dream smooths his thumb over Tommy's chin in a far cry of intimacy. "Nothing can distract you from the mission, Tommy. Not *you*, Cyberlife's greatest creation." It doesn't inspire the same ping of pride in his chest as it used to. How could it, when all he can think of is Q's pleased grin and Wilbur's laugh and Fran's furry body pressing against his chest.

Dream's praise means nothing to him. It just feels like a hollow consolation.

"But that detective of yours is getting distracted. He's falling into the trap, taken the bait. He's becoming sympathetic to the deviant's *farse*. And we can't have that."

Tommy feels the edge of Dream's nail against his skin. The worst part is that he can't argue, even if he wanted to. He's not stupid, as much as he'd prefer to turn a blind eye to Wilbur's developing sympathies. He knows how highly Wilbur regards Niki, how highly he holds her thoughts and opinions. How that, combined with Tommy himself, has been warping his own opinions.

Dream is silent for a long moment, considering. He lets Tommy's chin drop from between his fingers and instead runs his hand through Tommy's hair. It lacks the personality that Wilbur's touch has—a scratch to the back of his scalp, a tug to the strands that hang in his eyes whenever he has atrocious bedhead. "If we ever hope to solve this case, you need a partner that will pull their own weight."

His words drop like a stone in his gut.

He's talking about reassignment. He's fucking talking about *reassignment*.

Tommy feels sick. "I don't think that's a very good idea," he says before the thought even fully solidifies. The silence after is damning. He keeps going anyway. "Wilbur pulls his own weight. He has since first gained interest in the case. I mean, think of how much inside information we've gained from Niki. And keeping her around was all Wilbur's idea."

Dream dips his head. "He has had some useful ideas, but ultimately, he will only slow us down." His hand brushes through his hair softly. Comfortingly. Tommy wants nothing more than to pull away.

"He won't," he insists. "He's been doing so much better lately. With sleep and substantial food in his stomach, he'll have more energy to put towards the case." His breath is coming faster and faster, and his chest heaves. It takes more focus and more effort to keep his LED from flashing red. "Besides, we'd lose time if I have to adjust to a new partner. And—and Wilbur is

more familiar with the case. A new partner would have to be informed of every little piece of info." He shakes his head, and Dream's hand tightens in his hair. "It isn't worth it."

"Tommy." His praise means nothing to him, but it seems his disappointment, his *ire*, still holds some weight. Tommy shrinks under the thunder of his voice. "This isn't a discussion. It's an *order*." He yanks Tommy back by his hair, something dark and considering in his silence. "Or have you forgotten how to take those now?"

His breath stutters, but he doesn't answer. He can't, at least right away. Instead, he stares over Dream's shoulder, out the far window where the wind shakes bare tree branches. He misses when the community house was an island surrounded by an emerald sea. When Tommy could look out into the mystery of the forest and dream of losing himself amongst the trees. He misses the sun. He misses the dirt underneath his fingernails.

"I have not," he says through grit teeth.

Again, Dream regards him for a long time. Then, he releases his grip on Tommy's hair. "I should hope not. You know, Tommy, your behavior lately has been... of. You've forgotten how to be a machine, it seems."

The implication stings, and Tommy barely holds in his flinch. "I don't think that's something I *could* forget."

He pats his cheek roughly. "Good. I don't *want* to be disappointed with you, Tommy, but you make it so hard. I better see some improvement." It feels like a punch to his gut, and Tommy resists the urge to double over. Instead, he blinks vacant, unseeing eyes. "And that starts with a new partner. Get yourself away from this terrible influence."

And with that touching goodbye, Tommy's eyes snap open. He's still sprawled out on the couch, head pillowed in Wilbur's lap like it so often is when they settled down to watch TV.

Heart hammering in his chest, he jolts up. He can't hear the TV over the thirium rushing in his ears, over his hitching, hiccupping breaths. His eyes sting and blur as his hand travels up his body, grasping at the sweater collar choking him. His fingers scratch at it uselessly, catching on his skin despite the numbness traveling through his face.

He feels like he's dying. Like his thirium pump was just pulled out—his chest an aching, hollowed out, *pulsing* wound—and he only has a few seconds to live. A mindless rhythm beats in his head, a throbbing pain that only escalates his general panic. He breathes in and out with short, staccato breaths, and not even the jerky fall and rise of his chest serves as a dull comfort.

But then there are hands circling his wrists, gently tugging fingers with fresh thirium caught underneath the nails away from his neck. And then those hands are back, cupping his face, smoothing rough, calloused thumbs underneath his slick eyes.

Tommy leans into them, because they're familiar and warm. Because, even though he can't see through blurry, puffy eyes, he knows these hands belong to Wilbur.

Eventually, sound returns to him in little snippets. His breath slows, especially when he wriggles his hand into position against Wilbur's chest, feeling the steady—if not too quick—thump of his heart against numb fingers. "It's okay," Wilbur assures him in soft, gentle whispers, hands running through his hair, scraping along his scalp.

It's not okay. It's not okay, and it's likely to never be okay again. But Tommy lets Wilbur talk him down from his panic, focusing on the lumps in the couch and the golden glow of the Christmas lights.

When he's calm enough, Wilbur asks him what's wrong, and Tommy doesn't have the heart to tell him the truth. He gets the vague sense that everything would be okay if he did—Wilbur would understand and they would undoubtedly come up with some plan to set everything right.

But the words don't come to him, and Tommy can't think through the haze of panic and the warmth of Wilbur's undivided attention. He basks in it, like a garden snake, and focuses on steadying the rise and fall of his chest. And, when he feels steady enough, he tells Wilbur the most simplified version of the truth: that he had a dream where they were separated.

"That's not going to happen," he says, conviction coloring his voice. He pulls Tommy to him, back bent in something that should be uncomfortable, and lets him rest his head on his shoulder. "We're fine, Tommy. We're good."

That isn't quite true, though Tommy lacks the courage to tell him. Instead, he lets himself be a coward and revels in the affection, the comfort.

They sit like that for a while, both awkwardly bent over to fit like mismatched puzzle pieces. Wilbur presses his temple against Tommy's burning LED, and it soothes something deep within him. Distantly, he feels the skin around it retract. "You know," he starts, still in that soothing tone. "Puffy has been encouraging me to be more, uh, honest. To tell people how much they mean to me."

Something sickly oozes in his gut, along with a fresh wave of panic. "Wil," Tommy says, *protests*, because he doesn't want to hear this. He can't hear this, not with nausea still lingering in his throat. Not with the hollow hole in his chest where his heart used to be.

"No, it's okay." Wilbur smiles, and something in Tommy *aches*. "I care about you, Toms. So fucking much. I—" his voice cracks a little, but it's in a good way. "You've made my life so much better. You've given me something to hold onto. Something to live for when I had nothing." Tommy squeezes his eyes shut against the pain. "I— You're my brother, Toms, as much as Techno is. You're my family, as much as he and Phil are. I owe you so much, I could never repay you."

Tommy sobs, but it gets caught in his throat.

Wilbur runs his hand through his hair and presses a kiss to his temple. "You're my brother, Toms, and I love you."

He feels like his chest is going to cave in on itself, on the hollow cavern where his heart should be. Phantom images of a lightly cracked red wall dance in front of him, but, in the end, they're only that: phantom images.

Despite his eyes squeezed shut until light dances behind them, he still manages to catch the last notification he wants to see right now.

Relationship with Wilbur: Family ^

Chapter End Notes

Y'all.... I just want to say thank you so much for 70K. That's insane. The amount of attention this fic has been getting is insane. I'm so grateful all you reading, all you commenting, and for all the people making fanart. I wanna shake you all around like a magic 8-ball. It's been absolutely incredible so far, and I'm especially excited for next few chapters!!!

If you want immediate updates to when the next chapter comes out, check out my twitter (@NymphiiWrites). I have confirmed that there sometimes is a delay in when the update email is sent out, but I tweet a few minutes after I post a chapter. Also feel free to scream at me on twitter, if you want :)

the machine's ill-fitting skin

Chapter Summary

Tommy wrestles with Dream's unthinkable orders.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Thirty-One: The Machine's Ill-Fitting Skin

December 10th, 2038

10:37 AM

The precinct isn't much changed when they stroll through it, past the front desk with its stationary androids, and weave through the throngs of desks and other officers. Tommy trails behind a much more chipper Wilbur, as he used to do when all Wilbur viewed him with was contempt. Those were simpler times.

The bullpen is as noisy as it usually is—he spots Quackity hunched over Charlie's desk, a furrow to his brow as he, unusually serious, gestures to something on the computer screen. He spots Techno as he leans back in his chair, fingers massaging his temples with a frown. He spots Schlatt, although he barely registers in his mind. Just one more speck of information as they pass by and, finally, stop at their desks.

It had always eluded him. The change from *Wilbur's desk* to *Wilbur and Tommy's desks*. For all his observational prowess—the abilities afforded to him by the code in his system, by his electronic eyes—he couldn't quite place that. Nor could he really jot down every shifting opinion of Wilbur's, other than the dates that their relationship status had upgraded.

But there was more to the situation than a relationship status dictated by his system. There was more to *them*. Tommy, for all his predictive software, could have never predicted how Wilbur would change.

And now he was paying the price. The results of his actions—intentional or not—were upon him soon. A reckoning, of sorts. Tommy still couldn't muster up anything other than pure, bone-deep exhaustion at the thought, but a slow, freezing dread was beginning to work its way through his system.

He spent all of yesterday in—well, panic isn't quite the right word for it. He isn't capable of panic—he isn't capable of anything approaching emotion, he reminds himself distantly—but he is capable of whirring thoughts that ping off the interior of his skull, colliding and disrupting the process with every second. He spent the entire day on the couch, legs folded underneath him, eyes closed as he contemplated everything.

And yet, he came to no conclusions.

There *were* no conclusions to be drawn. Dream had given him an order, and Tommy was made to follow orders. There was nothing he could do other than feel a helpless, agonizing clench in his hollow chest.

Wilbur, pleased and oblivious and with happiness written in every line of his face, settles down at his desk. He drapes his coat over the back of his chair, pulls his phone out of his pocket, places his cup of coffee on the corner of his desk, and boots up his computer. It's the same dance, every time, but Tommy doesn't grow tired of watching it. It only occurs to him then that it might be the last time he's given the opportunity—to see Wilbur's face relaxed, hand massaging at a crick in his neck.

He looks up when Tommy doesn't join him, when he doesn't pick up his part of their usual routine. Wilbur tilts his head, a small smile tugging at his lips. He's been more relaxed since taking Puffy's advice and admitting how much he cares. It's like a massive weight has been taken off his shoulders.

Tommy doesn't manage a smile back. He stands, adrift, no part of him touching Wil's desk or Wil himself. An island in a sea of turbulent waves. He doesn't smile because he can't think of a single reason *to* smile. Because he can't imagine his mouth curving in delight or the mangled expression that his attempt would surely result in.

He doesn't smile, but he *does* allow himself a moment of quiet contemplation to memorize Wilbur's face.

The moment is over far too quickly.

The door to Phil's office swings open, squeaking on creaky hinges that have Tommy tensing automatically. "Wilbur," he calls out, and Tommy's hands grasp at his own elbows, fingers digging into the skinny meat of his biceps. A shiver wracks his body, although he can't tell if it's from dreaded anticipation or the accustomed warmth he can no longer feel.

Automatically, he rubs his arms, but not even the borrowed coat draped around his shoulders seems to be doing much. "Can I speak to you two?"

Wilbur glances between Tommy's dead expression and Phil's neutral one. "Yeah, we'll be there in a second." The whole office quiets. A few officers look up from their work, but the low buzz of conversation picks up quickly. This is nothing out of the ordinary, to them. In his seat, Wilbur hesitates. "Hey," he says, tilting his head until he meets Tommy's blank gaze. He reaches out, tugging on one of the sloppily rolled sleeves until it fits over Tommy's trembling hand. "You good?"

Tommy says nothing. His LED wobbles, and he allows it to draw his focus, infusing his own energy and will into keeping it a steady blue.

"Wilbur," Phil calls again after a moment, more insistent. Wilbur glances up, and he must read something in Phil's face that Tommy cannot—a certain intensity, or a lack of amusement in the lines around his eyes—because he sits up almost immediately.

And yet, Tommy's feet are rooted to the floor. If he goes into that office, if he hears what he knows will inevitably spill out of Phil's mouth...

But then Wilbur is standing up properly, giving him an uneasy smile and reaching out to ruffle his hair, automatically, before aborting the motion. Instead, he bumps their shoulders together lightly as he passes. Still, Tommy lingers. As Wilbur crosses the space between their island of desks and Phil's office, he watches. He watches his back—the lack of tension, the shape of his shoulder blades, the slope of his spine—and he has no choice but to follow.

Phil waits in the doorway for them both to pass, making it infinitely harder to get into his office. Tommy squeezes past him, pressing his back into the doorframe and trying to ignore the weight of his disapproving stare. It takes a lot of effort to keep his face free of any damning expressions, but he does it. His LED once again wavers on the precipice of yellow, but, if he stares hard enough at any undefined point—vision blurring around the edges, teeth grit until his jaw aches—he can keep it blue.

The door slams shut behind them, and the atmosphere—at least to the two of them that *know*—is stifling in its tension. Phil says nothing, walking around them to sit behind his ornate desk, hands pressed against the front of it. He stares at the papers scattered over it, at the keyboard pushed to the side.

"Early this morning," he starts, slowly. Tommy feels his gut lurch. "I received an email." Finally, he glances up, piercing eyes jumping between them before landing on Tommy. The wrinkles around his eyes look even more pronounced. "From Tommy."

Wilbur glances at Tommy, as if looking for some break in his careful neutrality. He won't find one, and Tommy doesn't turn to acknowledge him. He stares straight ahead, arms tucked behind him in a subservient posture typical of the perfect model android.

For some reason, the position grates on him in a way it shouldn't—his shoulders feel stretched too far and his fingers itch for something to do other than grasp at his bare wrists.

Phil folds his hands over his desk, fingers laced together delicately. He's got the hands of a bureaucrat—soft skin, well taken care of nails, and faint, worn calluses that allude to different times. He looks every bit the part of a police captain, and Tommy finds it hard to imagine him as anything else. The typical blue officer's uniform just looks wrong on him. "It was a request for a partner reassignment."

An ax falling down on an exposed neck. A guillotine targeting the same, soft spot. A gunshot echoing against brick walls and into a rainy night.

None of these things have the same weight that Phil's words have, nor do they match the silence after.

There's a lump in his throat, and Tommy needs to make it go away. But then he feels the weight of Wilbur's stare on him, and he *can't* move. If he moves, he'll break whatever illusion he's managed to keep so far, and then it will all fall apart. And while that is admittedly tempting—it *shouldn't* be; it *isn't*—he needs to separate himself from Wilbur as quickly and easily as possible.

He knows it won't be that easy. Tommy may be a fool but he isn't *stupid*. Wilbur has made his feelings perfectly clear, and it won't be easy to extract himself from their partnership without giving some explanation. Explanations that he has yet to come up with or that he refuses to say, due to their unbelievable or hurtful nature.

"Are you joking?" Wilbur asks after too long and, even without being able to look to confirm, Tommy can hear the confusion. "Are you—is this a joke?" Despite the picture his eyes are glued to, Tommy can tell when Wilbur angles his body away from Phil and towards himself. He can imagine what expressions must be warping his face; confusion, denial, betrayal, pain.

He doesn't move his eyes away from the spot they've found.

"This isn't a joke." Out of the corner of his eye, he watches as Phil swivels the computer screen around until Wilbur can see it. On the screen, the email Tommy sent—a brief, two-sentence email worded with pure efficiency almost to the point of impolite bluntness—is pulled up. More of that thick, cloying silence consumes them as Wilbur reads and confirms with his own two eyes. "Tommy has asked for another partner, and, when I called George to double check, he said that he trusts Tommy's judgement."

Does George know what Dream asked of him? Demanded, more accurately. Does he agree? Or does he, like Tommy, find it to only be a waste of valuable time?

"Now, I can't speak to the reason why—" Now, two sets of eyes land on him. His shoulders instinctively start to stiffen, but he beats down the urge. Instead, he meets Phil's gaze and holds it, despite the way it burns. "—but I have to respect the request unless Tommy has a change of heart."

There's a dip in the conversation meant for Tommy's response. He can't find any words that feel meaningful enough, though, so he says nothing, focuses on the burn of his LED until it retreats back to something manageable. His whole body feels too hot and too cold at the same time; numb and itchy and burning. His fingers tighten around his wrists. His nails sink into his skin.

Tommy shakes his head.

"Right. Well, that's that, then." Phil sits back. Any of the joy he's seen on him during their Sunday meals has long since slipped away, leaving him the same, weary father. He drags a hand across his face. "Wilbur, you're off the case and back on homicide. Tommy—" he hesitates, wavering for just a moment. "I have a potential candidate, but I'll need to run it by them. For now, are you okay staying at the station?"

His chest aches and his throat burns, and Tommy needs, more than anything, for this to be some nightmare. His nails break skin, and the warning clouding his vision as thirium trickles down his wrist is all the confirmation he needs that it isn't. The realization hadn't set in until now, and it claws at his thirium pump like Tubbo's hands do in his dreams.

Wordlessly, he nods.

"Okay," Phil turns his computer back to him. "Today, just focus on making the switch. Gather up all the classified documents and get ready to send them. Round up any loose ends that need tending to. It can be a short day—" his eyes land on Wilbur and something endlessly sympathy fills them. "—if you finish up quickly."

"I don't understand," Wilbur says bluntly. He's looking for an answer that neither Tommy nor Phil can provide, and instead his question hangs, dead and answerless, in the air between the three of them. His thirium pump beats against his chest in a frantic rhythm that offers no comfort. "I don't—"

"Wilbur," Phil says, just shy of too harsh. His expression immediately softens. "I can't offer you the answers you're looking for. I only know so much." His gaze slides over, pointed, to Tommy. "And I'm only doing my job. It might help if you focus on yours, as well."

The worst part is that Phil really sounds like he's trying to be kind. He's softening his features, speaking softly, biting back some of his jumpier instincts. But Tommy can still physically feel how it makes Wilbur curl into himself; yet another dismissal to add to a long, ever-growing list.

Without any further reason to stay, Wilbur only lingers a moment longer before he's out the door. And Tommy, despite having no reason to do so, can only follow him out without so much as a word.

He makes it out of the door and part way into the main room before Wilbur comes to a sudden stop. He turns around, and Tommy isn't ready for it—his face is numb, much like the rest of him, and he has no idea what telling look might be on his face. Wilbur's expression—which he sees for a brief second before he can avert his eyes—is confused yet determined. "If you think you're slipping away that easily..." he trails off, intent no less obvious despite his unfinished sentence.

"I don't know what you mean," Tommy says anyway, voice dead and expressionless. Even less than a machine's because he no longer has to foster growth between himself and Wilbur. In fact, he's sure Dream wants to snip the threads connecting them.

Without another word, Wilbur reaches out. His hand wraps around Tommy's wrist and—despite the tension thrumming through his taut muscles—his grip is surprisingly delicate. He could easily break out of it with a simple flex, but he lets himself be pulled along nonetheless, lost in the heat of Wilbur's fingers pressed against his pulse.

Wilbur pulls him through the precinct, weaving between the desks until they break free of the general bullpen. They pass the holding cells, the interrogation rooms, and the break room until Wilbur pulls him into a door Tommy hasn't yet had the privilege of cataloging.

Upon further inspection—the obvious words written across the far wall; Tommy doesn't have the mental energy to spare examining the fucking room—it's one of many evidence lockers in the precinct. But to him, it just looks like a medium-sized concrete box low-lit with dim, fluorescent lights.

Wilbur lets go of Tommy's wrist but keeps walking, only coming to a stop in the middle of the room. He turns, arms crossed over his chest. "Why do you want to switch partners?"

So they're getting into this, then. Tommy knew it wouldn't be easy, but he had hoped to avoid this particular conversation. Or at least have it in front of Phil, where he might be saved some of the more intimate aspects due to their audience.

His system buzzes, once—a familiar warning, but one he almost flinches at nonetheless; his tenuous grip on his LED wavers for just a brief second. He knows he's been slipping, recently—as Dream had so violently reminded him—but he finds the buzz is a useless reminder of his own inadequacy. He knows he needs to do better, to *be* better. He doesn't need his own system shoving it in his face.

"I don't *want* anything. I'm not capable of that," Tommy says, voice sounding cold and detached, even to his own ears. He can't bear to look at Wilbur—to see whatever expression twists his face—but there's nothing else in the room, save for a giant control panel demanding a password. He lets his gaze focus on that, just over Wilbur's shoulder, and hopes his instability isn't as obvious as it feels. "But this is a necessary change. Our productivity was slipping, and this mission is only becoming more important with every wasted second."

"And that means you have to have a different partner?" There's no hurt in his voice, not yet. There's only a familiar confusion and a desperate longing to understand—to right whatever wrongs Tommy perceives. "I don't—Tommy, if you were worried about the mission, you could've just *told* me. I know we've been taking it easy, lately, but I can always step it up, if that's what you need."

He would, wouldn't he? He would do anything for the creature he considers his brother, and isn't that still a punch to the gut? It will always be a punch to the gut, even after a whole day of stewing in silence and his own self-pity.

Tommy feels sick with the weight of the conversation.

"It's not—" he stumbles, fighting the flutter of eyes that desperately want to shut and losing control of his other faculties. He doesn't know when his perfect android posture slipped away—maybe between Phil's office and here—but his hands hang, limp, at his sides. "It's not something you can fix."

Wilbur scoffs. "I didn't take you as someone to jump ship that easily. Especially after... well, everything."

"Trust me when I say that this isn't fucking *easy*." Tommy sucks in a breath as another buzz tickles at the base of his neck. A familiar, impossible heat singes the inside of his veins, and he finds himself rubbing at them, at his buzzing neck. His nails scratch his skin, but the overwhelming sensations don't stop. His mind reels, and it latches onto the first thing he can

remember. "You're too ineffective, too—too *soft*," he says, echoing Dream's words. "You're becoming sympathetic to the deviants. And you're slowing me down."

The room really is such an ugly grey color. The walls, the ceiling, the floor—all of it, dull and smooth and reflecting the pale light. It's a disgusting room for a disgusting conversation. Some of his synthetic skin catches underneath his nails.

"Slowing you—" Out of the corner of his eye, Wilbur shakes his head. "Tommy, what the fuck is going on?" He takes a step closer, and, again, Tommy has to contain a flinch. Wilbur pauses, assessing in his silence. "Something's wrong. This isn't—You're acting weird. You're *talking* weird." There's another pause, and Tommy longs to know what expression he wears. "Is it the—whatever happened the other day? That fever?"

Wilbur reaches out, the back of his hand angled to brush against his forehead. Tommy catches him by the wrist, eyes instinctively meeting his before darting away. There's too much there to sort through—too much raw emotion and intensity.

He feels burned by it.

"Nothing is going on. I'm *fine*." He drops Wilbur's hand when he's sure he won't try again. "Maybe for the first time, I'm actually functioning as I'm supposed to, without *you* to cloud my judgement." His words are poison on his lips. In response, his nails sink into his palms, and cool thirium beads against his skin. He sucks in a breath. "You've been holding me back. On the highway, at the Eden Club." His jaw shuts with an audible click, but he can feel the pressure building.

Those, while not pleasant reminders, are safe ground. But what dances along the edge of his mind—the words trying to force themselves out of his lips no matter how his gut clenches nor the cold sweat that seems to break out along the back of his neck—is not.

Wilbur's relationship status flickers in the corner of his vision; a visceral reminder of his high esteem in Wilbur's eyes and of everything he stands to lose in this moment.

"On the rooftop."

Whatever was pushing that agenda—pushing the poison out of his mouth—achieved its goal. Without even looking at Wilbur—he can't, he *can't* know the effect his words have on him—he can feel his flinch in the air.

There's a moment of horrible, tense silence, and then, quietly, "You told me I was more important than the mission."

And you are. You are, Wilbur. You always have been, and you always will be.

But those words don't come out of his mouth, despite how they resonate with the beating of his thirium pump. Nothing comes out.

Wilbur takes a deep, shuddering breath, and drags a hand across his face. "You keep saying that everything is fine, but I just can't believe that and the evidence supports it. Your behavior

—it's like you've regressed. You're acting like you did when we first met." He pauses. "Like a machine."

It sounds like an accusation coming from him. Tommy focuses on the swirl of his LED and ignores the ache of his hollow chest. "I am a machine, *Lieutenant*. Or have you forgotten?"

He sucks in a sharp, wounded noise between his teeth. "This isn't you," Wilbur states, decisive if only in this. "This isn't—Listen, let's just go home, take the day, and sort out whatever this is. We can figure it out."

This is the option Tommy always knew was there. The option of safety and communication, of alternate solutions and a path where Tommy and Wilbur aren't separated. It's the golden ticket Tommy has longed for.

But his path was sealed the second Dream opened up his mouth.

"There's nothing *to* figure out." Anger bleeds into his tone, and that only adds to the heat underneath his skin. Is he so broken, so beyond fucked up, that he can't even pretend to be neutral anymore? Has he really fallen so far that he can't wear this machine's skin anymore? That cold, indifferent, distant expression? Is it really so far from his reach that even his straining, aching fingertips can't touch it? His body fits inside the too-loose skin, exposing the cracks of humanity that have managed to slip in. "I need a partner that's not you."

"But why?" Wilbur moves forward, hands coming up as if to grab Tommy's elbows. He aborts the movement at the last second, empty hands hanging in the chasm between them. "You aren't giving me an explanation. Tell me what I need to do to fix this." *What I need to do to get you to stay.*

Tommy stares at the spot above Wilbur's shoulder. His chest aches in anticipation of the false explanations budding in his throat like poisonous vines puncturing his skin. "Because I have a mission to complete. And because I, unlike you, am not tricked by this—this victim's façade that every deviant seems to put up. I'm not tricked by their false humanity." His jaw tenses as he shakes his head. "And I need a partner that sees them for what they really are."

"A partner that sees them for what they really are or ignores *you* for what you really are?"

Tommy freezes, eyes instinctively snapping to Wilbur's before, once again, darting away. His hands curl and uncurl, nails digging into his palms briefly before disappearing from his skin altogether. He longs for the coin burning a hole through his pocket, but something keeps him rooted in place. "If you're implying—"

"That you're a deviant?" Wilbur huffs, shifting in place. "We may not know how deviancy works completely, but I'd have to be blind to miss the signs." His skin burns with the accusation. His lips, subconsciously, curl back into something resembling a snarl. "Tommy, most of the things you do—androids don't fucking do them! They don't abandon their mission to look after drunk detectives, or—or get distracted by petting a dog." He throws his hands up in the air. It would be comical, if Tommy wasn't distracted by the churning in his gut. "And they don't break down asking their partner to get therapy because they're *worried* about them. Do you—are you seeing how oblivious you've been?"

An old consuming panic fills his mind—the one that arises whenever someone points a finger at him and accuses him of being something he is not.

"First of all," he spits. "I am an android. I was designed to hunt *deviants* and to prevent the loss of human life." He gives Wilbur's chin a very pointed look. "I have always, at all times, been pursuing at least one of them. Second of all, everything I have done—*everything*—has been to get you to work on this goddamn case."

Wilbur scoffs. "Oh, so becoming my friend was all part of some convoluted plot to get me to work on the case?"

No. "Of course it was, Lieutenant. Anything and everything I do is for the mission."

Tommy expects some quick retort, some sort of kindling to the fire steadily growing within him. The silence that follows is a letdown, though, and so is the horrified, considering look on Wilbur's face when Tommy bites the bullet and takes a glance. "Of course it was," Wilbur repeats, almost to himself. Then, he seems to shake himself out of whatever stupor temporarily consumed him. "*No.* What about all that shit you told me? Time and time again? That I'm more important than the mission, that you're proud of me. All that time spent off work to recover. All the therapy shit. You can't—you can't *fake* that."

He says it like he wants to inspire some kind of determination in himself, but he just sounds unsure. Tommy, after a wavering, hesitating moment, sinks his claws into the cracks of uncertainty.

"I can, and I did." Oddly enough, the feeling of cruel, hollow laughter threatens to bubble up in his chest. He swallows around it and savors its bitter taste. "I told you whatever I thought was necessary to make you like me, and it fucking worked." It does erupt, then—a short laugh that scrapes along the inside of his raw throat. "It fucking *worked*." Their relationship status blinks at him from the corner of his vision, unchanging despite the harsh words being thrown around. "Maybe a little too well."

Wilbur has always been sensitive about his vulnerability. They've talked about it a bit—never at any great length, or Wilbur gets antsy, hands reaching for cigarettes he knows he needs to throw out. He hates to be vulnerable more than anything else in the world, which is what makes it such a strong impact when he *is* vulnerable, especially willingly.

But all the vulnerability only means that Tommy knows him. And he knows what will cut the deepest.

"Did you really think I was your *brother*? That I was anything other than a machine stuck to a defective detective and trying to make the best out of that bad situation?" Tommy pauses, allowing time for his words to sink in. Allowing time for him to get his own breathing back under control and to tighten his hold on his LED. "I know I'm Cyberlife's best creation, but really, Lieutenant. That's just pathetic."

The fluorescent lights buzz, and Tommy watches Wilbur's chest rise and fall at such a rapid pace.

"This isn't you," he says again, although he sounds a lot less sure of himself. "You—Is this Cyberlife? Is this that—that DREAM thing that George told me about?"

Tommy doesn't quite manage to control his honest reaction in time; he startles, body jolting and eyes wandering up to stare at Wilbur's chin. "You—" Something ugly settles in his gut. "You were asking George about me."

"I was curious," Wilbur says. He shifts, crossing his arms over his chest. It's defensive body language—by keeping the arms covered over the chest, a person protects some of their most vital organs, including the heart. It also has the effect of closing the person off, physically, from the conversation. "Answer the question."

Tommy tries to pretend it doesn't bother him. His fingers itch for the comforting weight of his coin. "If you're trying to diminish this conversation by suggesting that Cyberlife is putting words in my mouth—" he huffs, and it almost sounds like laughter. If only Wilbur knew how close he is to the truth. He feels a panicked prickling sensation in his limbs.

"I'm trying to understand." Wilbur drags a hand across his face, lingering on his jaw, where a hint of budding stubble scrapes his hand. He sounds oh so terribly tired. It makes something in Tommy ache. "It's such a sudden change. It's uncharacteristic."

It would be easier just to tell him the truth. It would do away with this entire, exhausting exchange. But it would also give Wilbur a spark of hope. It would give him a reason to keep prying, to keep poking. A reason to take up a pitchfork and storm the ivory towers of Cyberlife.

And Tommy needs, more than anything, a clean break.

He allows that prickling panic to overtake him, to fuel his quick movements. "I'm done with this ridiculous conversation. As Phil said, I'm getting another partner. We need to start moving all the files." He turns on his heel. But, when he pulls the door open by its sleek, steel handle, a spread hand lands in the center and slams it shut. Wilbur moves in, pressing his body against the wall and his forearm as a barricade. Tommy's jaw clicks.

"Tommy, look at me," he says, low but not dangerous. No matter what Tommy might think, Wilbur's apology floats through his brain, as does his certain promise. No harm will come to him by Wilbur's hand, and of that, he's sure. Still, he stares hard at Wilbur's shoulder despite the command. Wilbur's frustration rolls off of him in waves. "Look at me," he begs.

He can't. If he looks at Wilbur, if he sees him more than the few glances he couldn't help, Tommy feels like he'll shatter. The entire façade he's crafted, the entire day's worth of uncomfortable stares and conversations, will have been for nothing. If he looks at Wilbur, the ill-fitting skin he wears will slip right off him, revealing far too much of what makes up his skeleton.

He hesitates for a moment, eyes watching the sharp reflection of the lights on the walls. Then, he looks at Wilbur.

There's too much there. So much raw emotion, so much raw vulnerability. In his furrowed brow, the dark hairs there mussed by his hand dragging across his face, Tommy finds confusion. In his mouth—downturned and red and raw from his teeth—he sees only worry. In his free hand, the one that dangles uselessly by his side, Wilbur keeps his nerves. His fingers twitch and curl, like all he wants in the world is to reach out.

"Why are you doing this? Truly?"

There are many answers he could choose. But, in that quiet, tense moment, the only answer that would make Wilbur go away for good comes to him. It's terrifying and unthinkable, and it may very well undo all the work Tommy had done trying to build up his self-esteem. As soon as it fully materializes inside his brain, Tommy shoves it away.

"Answer me," Wilbur asks, eyes wrinkling around the corners in a way that has nothing to do with laughter. It's stress—premature and undeserved, aging the lines of his young face. He looks old and tired, and his eyes—

Despite shoving them away, the words claw their way out the back of his throat, smearing along his tastebuds and leaving their sour taste, until they press themselves against the back of his teeth. He refuses to let them out, though, and he clenches until his jaw aches. No matter what, no matter how desperately he needs Wilbur to drop this, he refuses to do this.

Wilbur has chosen to be vulnerable around him, and that means that Tommy knows exactly how to hurt him.

"Answer me," Wilbur says again, more insistent. His face scrunches up in frustration, but he, as much as Tommy, is used to playing the waiting game. It's not easy to forget what a good detective he is, but it's only more apparent in times like these, when he uses silence in his favor. Tommy finds himself resisting the urge to shift under his intense stare.

Every second only grows closer. His body no longer feels like his own, but Tommy still reaches out, half-heartedly pulling at Wilbur's arm. "Let me out." His nails scrape lightly over his skin, but Wilbur does not move his arm. Panic builds, cool and icy and frantic, in his chest.

"Not until you answer me."

Tommy huffs, dropping his hands. In this stand-off, this test of wills, he knows he will win. He's won before—when Wilbur refused to eat—and he knows he'll win again. After all, he's only a machine. And Wilbur's only human.

What an uncrossable chasm between them.

"It seems—" Tommy begins, and he almost jolts in shock. He didn't mean to speak. He had no words to say, and yet his mouth opened of his own accord. This body is not his own anymore, and something icy drips down the line of his thin spine. "—that I made a miscalculation." He needs, more than anything in the world, to stop. His hand manages to reach up, fingers tangling in his own shirt, over his stomach. He tries to squeeze his eyes shut so he doesn't have to watch, but they stay wide open. "You aren't worth the effort."

Silence consumes the room. This close, he can hear the sound of Wilbur's heart stuttering. "Oh," he breathes, like it's a revelation. Tommy feels a sob build in his chest, but he knows it will never make it out. "You don't mean that."

Never, Tommy needs to say. *You are worth everything in the world, to me.*

Instead, he says, "Techno was right. I'm only sorry it took me this long to realize it." Wilbur doesn't move. He lingers, suspiciously wet eyes roaming every inch of Tommy's face, looking for some break. "Get out of my way."

And Wilbur, bottom lip trembling slightly, does as he's asked without a word of protest. Tommy brushes past him, and the place where his shoulder bumps Wilbur's *burns*.

The door locks firmly shut behind him, and Wilbur can only be thankful that the bathroom is empty. Escaping through the precinct hadn't been easy—he had felt too many eyes on him, despite the fact that no one knew about the events that just took place—but the longer he stayed in the silence of their shattered partnership, the harder it became to bear.

He falls back, letting his back rest against the door. He lingers there, the heel of his palms pressed into his eyes until stars explode behind his closed lids. He doesn't move them, even then, and instead focuses on the rapid rise and fall of his chest. It doesn't feel like any air is getting past the lump in his throat, but he tries, anyway.

Of course it had all been a lie. *Of course* it had been. What kind of idiot believes that an android made specifically to hunt down other androids would actually deviate? It was preposterous. It was *impossible*.

But he wanted it to be real so badly.

His chest aches and throbs, and a dull pain erupts in his back as he slides down the door. It scrapes the rough fabric of his shirt against his raw nerves until he finally collapses in an unstable heap. His fingers wander upwards, tangling in his hair and digging into his scalp.

It hasn't truly set in yet. Logically, Wilbur knows that he's been abandoned once again, tricked and betrayed by someone he thought was *different*. His body refuses to acknowledge it, though. In his hollow chest, there's only the dull ache of his battered heart. It will be worse, later, but for now, Wilbur allows himself to wallow in the disbelief, the denial, the realization.

Later, he'll cry and sob and break anything within his greedy reach. Later, he'll tear away any trace of Tommy from his home and from his heart. Later, he'll mourn the loss of their relationship and curse Tommy for being the one to break it in the same breath.

But for now, he simply sits in the dull light of a bathroom desperately in need of cleaning. He leans against the door and against the grubby tile, taking in the faint scent of soap and the

lingering bleach. He doesn't even react when a fist knocks at the door, and a tentative Techno calls out to him. He sounds far too awkward, which means that either Phil told him what happened or someone—Quackity, possibly—noticed his desperate escape.

Wilbur doesn't want to see him, right now. He wants to curl up in a little ball until the turbulent emotions inside him fade to something approaching normalcy, and then he wants to drive to the nearest bar and drink himself into oblivion. He wants to forget this horrible day, and he wants to forget that Tommy had tricked him into believing he could ever be worthy of love.

But Techno's knocks only grow more insistent with time, and Wilbur fears the scene that will make. He scoots back into the wall, allowing just enough room for the door to swing open, and twists the handle. Techno slips in the narrow crack Wilbur allows and then quickly shuts the door behind him.

Wilbur expects to be riddled with questions, a demand for answers. What is Techno supposed to think, when he finds his brother curled up on a dirty bathroom floor, fingers curled in his hair and palms pressed over his ears?

Techno doesn't say anything, though, just leans against the door next to him, the dim lights of the bathroom illuminating his strong jaw, his prominent nose.

They sit like that for too long. At some point, Wilbur curls over his legs, knees pressed against his chest. His bony chin rests on his knee and, with his eyes squeezed shut, he can almost pretend he's literally anywhere else. It's nice, despite the terrible circumstances, to just revel in the silence with Techno.

"I'm a fucking idiot," he says eventually, laughing despite the tears that prickle at the corners of his closed eyes. If he doesn't laugh now... He drags a hand across his face and against the sharp grin of his mouth. "I'm *such* a fucking idiot."

"You're not," Techno says in a grave voice.

"I am! You don't even—" he laughs again, short and sharp and not dissimilar to glass shattering on the rocks. A vodka bottle melting snow. "You don't even know the half of it, Tech." He shakes his head, disbelief and denial always at the forefront. "I thought he was a *deviant*. I thought he was a deviant, and I didn't even care. I went out of my way to hide it."

Techno is silent. Surprisingly, it doesn't feel judgmental.

"I thought he was a deviant, and I didn't even care because I just wanted to pretend that someone cared about me."

"Dad and I care about you," he says softly, a whispered admission.

But Wilbur just shakes his head, pressing his forehead back against his sharp knees. It's dark, here, in the cocoon that his tangled arms and legs make. He prefers it to facing Techno and the pity that drips off of him like a toxin. "It's not the same," he whispers, because it isn't.

Obligated, familial love broken from harsh words and abandonment and shitty, rough years. It isn't the same as what he thought he and Tommy had.

He sucks in a breath and tries to ignore how shaky and broken he sounds. "It just isn't the same."

The precinct at night is something else entirely.

Tommy hadn't had the *privilege* of being there at night until now; both because of their typical work schedule and because he always had a place in Wilbur's home, even if he was, at first, unwanted.

The main overhead lights are shut off to conserve energy, but the room is, by no means, *dark*. Pools of golden light splash across the floor from the scattered desk lamps of overnight officers, like lighthouses in a dark sea. Along the wall, there is a perfect line of gentle blue LEDs, and the light barely outlines all their different faces.

Tommy still scans them, committing their model types and appearances to memory, if only to provide him with something to do. Some meaningless way to stay useful when he feels anything but. One android has freckles scattered over her face, hair shorn short so no one can grab it. Another one has a slight discoloration to his left eye—a result of an old, faulty model and an accident that was never fixed quite right.

Here, in the night, it's only androids and the officers unlucky enough to get stuck with the night shift. Tommy has never met any of them, and their faces aren't familiar. He scans them, too, and tries to ignore the distrusting looks they send him every so often. They, unlike the day shift officers, haven't been afforded the opportunity to get used to him, and his shockingly young face—and the fact that he's curled up by the holding cells, back pressed against the solid glass—has not endeared him.

Although he does not glance to confirm, he can feel Niki's worried presence over his shoulder. She's sitting on the ground to match him, crossed knees pressed against the glass so she can be close to him. He feels the layer separating them more acutely than ever before, and he has been grappling with the urge to take her to one of the interrogation rooms for a while now.

He doesn't think their bare hands pressed against each other will help, though, so he keeps resisting. Tommy can feel her inquisitive gaze—burning and intense—and her curiosity, as if it's a physical thing. He knows she wants to ask questions, but—from the time he plopped down once the last of the day shift detectives had filed out—something far too telling must've shown on his face.

Tommy curls his knees further into his chest, tipping his head back until his crown meets the plexiglass with a thud that reverberates through his skin. He feels more than hears Niki's

resigned, somber sigh. "Oh, Tommy," she breathes, and his LED finally takes the plunge from considering yellow to a deep, violent red.

He closes his eyes against her sadness. Sleep won't find him tonight, but sometimes it's nice to pretend. Behind his closed eyes, he's greeted with visions of Christmas—of Techno presenting his mashed potatoes with a proud tilt to his mouth, of Phil settling exquisitely wrapped gifts under the tree, of Wilbur's hand in his hair.

Yeah. Sometimes it's nice to pretend.

Chapter End Notes

This is just your totally random reminder that this fic will have a happy ending!!! If any of my stories have anything less than a 100% happy ending, I will let y'all know beforehand. Some people just want nice endings from fics and that is so valid. I like to let people know what they're getting into. But this will be happy so don't worry :)

a patchwork of normalcy

Chapter Summary

Tommy and his new partner get acquainted.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Thirty-Two: A Patchwork of Normalcy

December 11th, 2038

12:30 PM

Light had come slowly that morning. It filtered in through the small windows on the far wall, mixing and mingling with the patches of lamp light on the floor. Eventually, the night shift officers had glanced up from their tiring work, and, upon seeing the sunlight, had packed up and filed out. Tommy had watched them go from the safety of his own drawn-up legs, and he had watched still as the day shift officers had finally filtered in.

He had stood then, although he hadn't felt like it, to face the day. He didn't get nearly as many odd stares from these officers, although one or two did a double take when they noticed him standing alone, with no Wilbur in sight.

Tommy had lingered by Niki's gilded cage for far too long. He hadn't said anything to her at all through the night, although he knew she was up with him. He still doesn't know what he ever did to deserve her, but her quiet companionship was the only thing that kept him from letting the shattered pieces of himself fall apart.

Instead, with her knees pressed against the glass—close enough for him to feel her humming system—he had carefully stitched himself back together, even if he was a patchwork of what he once was.

It would have to do, he had thought as he caught a glimpse of Phil walking in the door—messenger bag slung over his shoulder and fingers already pinching the bridge of his nose. Despite the worried stares burning his back, Tommy had pushed himself away from his anchor and drifted through a sea of officers until Phil caught sight of him.

He had directed him to his new partner's desk without so much as a name. A name, ultimately, was unnecessary—Tommy knew whose desk he loitered besides, hands awkwardly tucked against the small of his back. His mask of indifference was back firmly in place—the night *had* been good for something, at least; it afforded him some semblance of distance—and he wouldn't allow it to be knocked askew again.

When Schlatt walks through the door, an expensive-looking coat laid delicately over his broad shoulders, Tommy is not surprised. He still doesn't move, not until Schlatt's eyes meet Tommy's and that familiar, shark-like grin spreads across his face. "Tommy, right?" he says as he comes to a stop in front of his desk, setting down his bag against the side.

Tommy nods, unsettled and distrustful of the lack of hostility in his body language. He would've thought, based on their previous, negative interactions, that Schlatt wouldn't have taken the offer. Or, even if he had felt compelled to for some unknown reason, then he would've at least been... unfriendly, at the beginning.

Instead, his eyes are crinkled around the corners in poorly suppressed delight. "It's good to formally meet you. I was excited when I got that email from Phil," he says and sounds like he means it. He pulls his chair out, sinking into it and pulling a few things out of his bag. "Hey." He sits up suddenly, fixing Tommy with a serious look. "I wanted to apologize for being such a dick in the past."

Tommy's eyes flicker over him, but there's nothing odd. Even when Schlatt shrugs, looking uncomfortable yet sincere.

"I was, well—" he laughs, self-deprecating and infectious. "It's a bit embarrassing but a lot of my hostility actually stemmed from jealousy. I was pretty bitter that Wilbur got to be your partner, and I expressed that poorly." Schlatt forces his eyes to Tommy's. "Plus, Wilbur kind of—" he laughs again, although this one is much more bitter. "Well, let's just say he gets under my skin easily."

Some of the tension melts out of his shoulders. Tommy manages a smile and tries to ignore how mechanical it feels on his face. "That's—I'm sorry, too, for the comments I made." He isn't, not really. Schlatt acted like a dick to Wilbur, and Tommy retaliated fairly. But he knows how to play this game, and, in the face of such a genuine apology, he does feel something approaching regret. "As his partner, I had to work with him, and that meant playing to his interests."

"I understand," he says immediately and with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Honestly, your ruthless efficiency is one of the things I appreciate about you the most." His smile renews. "I think we'll work well together."

And, despite the reluctance and the uncertainty still lingering, Tommy can't help but agree. With every movement, Schlatt exudes confidence and efficiency. He settles his objects out on his desk neatly and in a certain order before running a hand over the button-up tucked into his dress pants. They even match in that; two overdressed detectives, clothes neat and orderly—or they would be, if Tommy hadn't spent the night hunched over himself.

Pulled from his musing by the phantom sensation of eyes on him, Tommy glances up to find Quackity watching him from across the room. His expression is lax but unreadable, eyes far too sharp and knowing.

Tommy turns away before he can read something from his ill-fitting mask. "It's my honor to work with such a talented detective."

Schlatt, predictably, preens. But to his credit, he manages to cover it up quickly, flipping through the pages of a leatherbound notebook until he reaches a clean page. Then, setting the tip of a pencil to the paper, he looks up. "Tell me about the cases."

And Tommy does. Pleased with Schlatt's efficiency and the sharp, determined look in his eyes, he launches right into a rough yet thorough description of all their cases thus far. He briefly goes over their very first case—the case of the missing deviant and the severed arm left behind in a nearby field. He notes how they didn't find anything of note and drops some light slander against Wilbur. He is nothing without his ability to adapt, even if the words taste like ash in his mouth.

From there, he jumps to Niki's case—their first big break. He goes over how he found her, the signs of deviancy littered all over the crime scene and within Niki herself. He goes over the interrogation, mentioning the specific methods he found useful to break her, and the product of all his hard work. He explains the reason why she's still here despite Cyberlife's desire to deconstruct a deviant. It feels like a betrayal of her trust, and guilt clogs his throat.

The whole time, Schlatt listens attentively, his notebook spread out on his desk while he jots down notes. He looks vaguely appreciative, humming with approval whenever Tommy describes his own deeds.

The case with Stella and Joy is hard to think about, let alone retell. He tries, still, explaining through stuttered words how he stumbled upon Stella in the garage, the information he was able to extract from her, and then, finally, her untimely death. He leaves out anything after that—the jarring pain of connecting to her when she died, the way he shut down afterwards, or the dull pang that lingered in his chest every time he pictured her young face. It wasn't vital to the case, he tells himself with lips pressed together, pausing long enough to allow Schlatt to catch up in his notes. It wasn't vital, and it had no place in his notes.

When his pencil finally stills, Tommy launches right back into it.

Ranboo's chase is but a brief blip. He doesn't want to linger on Wilbur's panicked face when he tried to launch himself over the fence. Instead, he talks about their suspicions, about Ranboo's desire to protect Michael. He covers the chase and, after only a moment of hesitation, he explains why Ranboo wasn't caught.

Schlatt scoffs at that, as Tommy expected, but thankfully, he doesn't say anything more. Tommy, despite his earlier conviction, still isn't sure how strong his mask is.

Rupert's chase is short as well. This time, Tommy glosses over why they didn't catch him, stating simply that he 'knew the playing field better' and that he was reckless in a way

Tommy couldn't risk. It was all lies, and it made something uneasy settle in his gut. Again, nothing about his excluded information was vital, so he figures it's fine.

He stalls after explaining the hunt through Eden Club and his role as a bloodhound, following the trail of footage before it was too late. Schlatt applauds him for his skill, but he can't help but hesitate when they reach the alley.

The end of that night was—well, Tommy can now recognize it for what it is; the result of Wilbur's changing views, and the conflict of allowing something so human to be hurt right before his very eyes. This is a vital piece of the puzzle, but Tommy can't help but remember how Schlatt had constantly picked at Wilbur's sore spots before. A shark scenting the water for weakness.

This was, quite obviously, a weakness. Wilbur, at the very least, deserves a break from the near-constant prodding.

Tommy sidesteps the issue of lying by simply repeating the same story Wilbur used that night; they had wrestled the deviants into the mud, the deviants got ahold of a gun, they barely avoided being shot, and then the deviants fled into the night.

Schlatt looks frustratingly pensive at that, but Tommy deftly avoids his curious questions by filling the silence even further. He arrives on the subject of Tubbo, and, despite his hands curled into fists by his side, he can't quite avoid the fervor that fills the space between them. Tubbo is his mission—his only hope to restore the trust he lost with Dream.

Although, as he fills Schlatt in on the intricacies that define Tubbo, he finds himself wondering if restoring that lost trust is really worth it.

Tommy ends his lengthy explanation with Sam, although he ends up having to change a lot. He avoids mentioning Fran—unimportant, although his thoughts linger, distastefully, on Wilbur and his pointed comments during their argument—and how Sam spoke with such conviction on the subject of Tommy's supposed deviancy.

Honestly, that's probably where Wilbur got the ridiculous notion. Afterwards, Tommy had asked him if he believed it, done his best to sway Wilbur from the idea, but Wilbur had said he didn't believe it. Tommy knew it was a lie—he could see the considering glint in his eyes—but he allowed it all the same.

How foolish he had been.

When he reaches the end of this particular tale, he changes it, just a tad. He tells Schlatt that, despite all their questions and Tommy's persuasive methods, Sam had refused to spill a single secret. They had retreated in defeat, heads hung low and filled with thoughts of perhaps gaining a warrant.

Schlatt nods in agreement, tapping the end of his pencil against his notebook in a way that reminds him of Wilbur. "We can do that," he agrees effortlessly, dropping his pencil to instead pull up a form on his computer. "I don't think the judge would deny us, especially if

there is reasonable doubt about Sam's role in the sudden spread of deviancy, like you suspect."

That would mean they have to see Sam again. Something drops in his gut, disrupting the tentative calm like a rock sinking into a tranquil pond. "Okay," he agrees despite the ripples still lapping at the insides of his stomach. It was an idea he had pitched to Wilbur, anyway. It was a good plan.

Schlatt makes a noise as he stretches his arms above his head. When he slowly retracts them, he scrubs a hand over his face. He looks tired. The light bags under his eyes are nothing compared to Wilbur's usual fare, but they're also nothing to scoff at. Without thinking about it, Tommy says, "Tired?"

His new partner nearly startles, as if he had already forgotten Tommy was standing over his shoulder. He smiles a little, and it doesn't quite meet his eyes. "I, am, unfortunately, a workaholic." So was Tommy built to be. His shoulders relax another fraction. "And I didn't get a shit ton of sleep last night. I was—" he does that self-deprecating laugh again, hand rubbing at the base of his neck. "Well, I guess you could say I was excited to see what the day would bring."

"And it brought me," Tommy says, eyes scanning the room. Neither Techno nor Wilbur are there, and he's hit with the almost certainty that they're together. It soothes something in him that shouldn't even ache—that, at the very least, Wilbur does not have to go through this alone. Nobody will have to stumble upon his corpse. "Do you drink coffee?" he asks suddenly, desperate to pry his mind away from the image of Wilbur sprawled out on the floor. Schlatt nods. "I'll go grab you some."

He flees, then, to be useful. Tommy weaves through the desks, pointedly walking the long way around just to avoid passing by his and Wilbur's desks. He passes by Quackity and Charlie's cluster and tries to ignore the way eyes track him.

The break room is, thankfully, empty. The TV screen is off and dark, and Tommy can't help but be thankful that he doesn't have to deal with the onslaught of bright colors and noise. It allows Tommy to do his work quickly and single-mindedly.

He checks the coffee still lingering in the pot, finds it smelling of burnt beans and a stale roast, and pours it out in the sink. The stainless steel turns brown as it washes down the drain, and Tommy debates how Schlatt likes his coffee. He seems like the type of person to drink black coffee, but it's useless to go off of appearances alone.

As he starts up a fresh batch, he casts his mind back, sorting through the assorted memories that Schlatt lingers in the background of. Eventually, he finds one where Schlatt's holding a coffee cup from some chain store. Tommy scans the side—reading from a tiny ingredients list—and then snags the communal creamer out of the fridge.

It will have to do, for now. Until Tommy can fully learn his drink order.

The coffee maker beeps, and Tommy retrieves the steaming mug. He pours about two shots of creamer into the drink, until it turns a lovely tan. When he turns around—the tops of his

knuckles burning where they brush the mug—he halts in his tracks.

Quackity stands in the doorway, shoulder pressed against the wall. He watches Tommy, with an expression so carefully neutral that even Tommy—built to analyze the tiniest of micro-expressions—can't discern his emotions.

"Quackity," he says, stiffly, and with a slight dip of his head. He has the distinct and acute feeling that he isn't leaving the room without having whatever conversation Quackity wants to have. He settles back against the counter, setting down the mug for now.

"Tommy," he returns, lips pulling up into a faint smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. Not mad then, or at least accustomed to hiding his anger. Quackity steps forward, joining him at the counter instead of blocking his only exit. A move specifically intended to make him relax, even if it's just a little bit. A move intended to communicate that Quackity is not the threat here.

For some reason, it irks him. It itches on the inside of his skin, along his veins. He frowns. "What? Are you here to accuse me of being a deviant, as well?" He scoffs, not allowing a single second of silence for Quackity to refute. "Because I'll tell you right now, I'm not."

Quackity holds up his hands. "I wasn't going to. I'm only here to check in."

"Well, you shouldn't." His care—his obvious affection that Tommy so reveled in before—burns. "It's a waste of time. I'm a machine, I'm functioning optimally, and you're neither my partner nor my handler so..."

"Hey, I'm just a dumb human. Humor me for a second." Tommy says nothing, eyes locked on the rippling surface of the coffee and the steam that rises up from it. It smells good, but it's nothing like the coffee Wilbur prefers—a light taupe, filled with so much sugar and cream it could kill a man. "Why did you decide to switch partners?"

His irritation only loosens his mouth. "Like I decide *anything*," he says with a scoff, only straightening when he realizes just how much it reveals. "I mean, he was slowing us down."

"Us?"

"Cyberlife."

Quackity nods, a sudden understanding dawning on his face. "Cyberlife," he repeats with a strange cadence to his voice. It's frustrating how hard Quackity can be to read when he chooses to hide it. His face is open and relaxed, and yet Tommy is certain that there's more to him than meets the eyes. Something tucked away and hidden underneath his very skin. And when Tommy is already puffing up like an agitated bird, ready to defend his reasonings, Quackity speaks. "Okay."

His brow furrows. "Okay?"

"I told you. I'm not here to question your motives." Quackity quirks his lips up into something resembling a smirk, and Tommy finally lets the tension leak out of him. He inhales

the scent of coffee, and, before he forgets, ducks towards the fridge to return the creamer. When he turns back, the amusement has slipped off his face. "Although, I do think I should warn you."

Tommy makes an interested noise. "Warn me?" The fridge slips from his fingers, closing with a quiet click.

"There's a reason that I switched partners." Quackity stalls for a moment, and a break in his mask allows Tommy to see some hesitation. He remembers, then, how shiftY Q was after switching partners. ShiftY and guilty and a little bit jumpy too, like every little movement grated on his frayed nerves. "And it wasn't just because we didn't get along."

Despite himself, Tommy straightens his spine, assessing eyes trailing over Quackity's face.

"Schlatt is—" he pauses again, eyes searching the break room for the appropriate words. "—a little unstable. He's a man with few friends, no family, and a job that he cares a hell of a lot about. Actually, his job is kind of the only thing he cares about." He's taken to pacing, hands making wild gestures in front of him as he talks. "When we worked together, he took up rants frequently, and while I thought they were amusing at first, they grew... disconcerting with time."

Something unsettling drops into his gut. Tommy trails a thumb over the hot ceramic.

"He's endlessly bitter at Wilbur for taking the promotion he believed was owed to him and for holding onto it for so long. I honestly believe he would do anything to get back at Wilbur." He fixes Tommy with a pointed, concerned look. "He's a man who takes more than others are willing to give. And, worst of all—" he slows to a stop in front of Tommy. "He's too charming for people to see the knife he holds against their back."

Tommy stays silent.

"I'm not going to judge your choices, or—or try to get an explanation that you aren't willing to give. I'm not going to choose sides or play favorites or belittle you." His eyes are too knowing, too clever. A startling glimpse behind the curtain to see the man behind the jester. "But I want you to be informed about what your choices mean. And I want you to be prepared. Schlatt may seem like a good choice now, but it takes time for that perception to wither away. To see the truth." He reaches out, hand landing on Tommy's shoulder with a certain weight to it. His eyes search Tommy's. "Be careful, okay? And know that I'm here for you, no matter what. No questions asked." He squeezes once, comforting.

"Tommy."

Tommy glances up sharply. Easily, as if he wasn't even there, Quackity steps away, hands fiddling with the tap until the sink turns on.

Schlatt stands in the doorway, stance wide and screaming of a certain confidence. His eyes dart between Quackity's back and Tommy, but he makes no connections other than a general distrust and paranoia.

Tommy steps away from the counter and away from Quackity, presenting his mug of coffee with a nervous smile. "I didn't know how you liked it, but I did remember that some of your orders in the past were right in the middle of sweet and bitter."

Schlatt glances back at Quackity, but, when he makes no indication of listening in, he takes the mug. He makes a pleasantly surprised nose as he takes a sip. "Not bad, kid," he says, smiling softly. It seems more sinister, somehow, with the lens of Quackity's words. "I was thinking of heading to lunch. I figure you can't eat, but, if you want to join me, I'd more than appreciate your company."

Tommy smiles. "I'd be honored to join you."

"Great." Schlatt grins, sipping his coffee in giant bursts until it's nearly drained. "Perfect." With one last glance towards Quackity's still form, he exits the room.

Tommy lingers for only a moment, but Quackity doesn't look up. He was hoping for any further information—an explanation that he so desperately needs—but there is none. And, with a sigh, Tommy follows Schlatt out.

Lunch is an odd affair.

Schlatt brings him to a large mall, sprawling and obscene in its enormity, and they wander through its crowded grounds. Tommy can't remember having ever been in a horde of this size, and he finds it to be overwhelming. His sensors pick up every minute detail; a new profile pops up, overlapping and crowding his vision, every time his eyes land on a face.

Eventually, they depart from the main area and into an oily pub. Its tables are slick with sticky beer, and the air is infused with the strong scent of greasy food. They sit down at a booth in the back corner. Schlatt orders something that makes Tommy want to cringe.

And then, with nothing else to fill the silence, they talk.

Inane things, mostly. Schlatt seems to know exactly what topics are off-limits, and he avoids them as easily as a dancer. Instead, they talk about Schlatt's early days as a detective, about his most interesting cases, and the shows he enjoys in his free time. He even brings up the idea of stopping by the Cyberlife store in the mall to pick up some needed items, and Tommy smiles.

When the conversation eventually runs dry, Schlatt steers them back towards work, and Tommy finds himself explaining the deviant traits list as Schlatt shovels fried pickles into his mouth.

The hour passes quickly and not unpleasantly. They leave more relaxed than they came, weaving through crowds and observing the stores as they pass by. Eventually, the Cyberlife store pops up, but Schlatt passes right by it.

Tommy lingers, confusion scrunching up his face. "Aren't we going in..?"

Schlatt turns, hands tucked casually in his pockets. "Oh, right," he says, eyes sliding until he's staring at the store, at the androids lined up with rows of steady LEDs—merchandise waiting to be bought. "Actually, I think it would be easier to stop by Wilbur's and pick up your stuff from there." Something lurches in his gut, and Tommy instinctively presses his hand against it. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

"I don't think that's a very good idea. Our parting... wasn't very clean. He won't want to see me right now."

"I'm sure he won't mind," he says again, sounding so recklessly sure of himself. "We'd be taking something off his hands and saving money at the same time. Win, win."

Then, without waiting to hear his response, Schlatt turns on his heel and heads for the exit. Something unsavory still lingers in his throat, but Tommy is helpless to do anything but follow.

Back at work, they continue to sort through the information. Schlatt reads through the reports with a narrowed gaze, and Tommy lingers around his desk, useless. Eventually, he finds a use in trailing along the far wall, past clusters of desks until he stops in front of the holding cells.

It hasn't even been a full day, but the knot in Tommy's chest loosens when he spots Niki, folded up on her bed. Her eyes are closed, LED circling yellow, but they quickly snap open. She's becoming more accustomed to her surroundings and to the slightest variations within them, but Tommy doesn't know if that's necessarily a good thing. She's paranoid and jumpy, and no matter how good a job she does at concealing it, he can see it.

So wrought of existence lately, he feels like a mirror. Like a patch of ice on the ground that will reflect anything that stands before him.

And, as he stands in front of her cage, he feels her itchy desire for freedom like a physical touch. His nails scratch at his skin.

They don't say anything, like last night. They don't need to. Tommy sits down once again, pressing his knees against the glass like he's so prone to doing. After a moment of observation, Niki joins him. She presses her bare, white hand against the glass, and Tommy automatically follows.

It's almost soothing, in a way. To have her system just beyond reach, but close enough to *feel* her. To know that she's there, even if the world is falling apart around him. He almost smiles, but he's much too tired for that. Instead, he leans forward until his head rests against the glass and goes into stasis mode, light enough to still sense the time as it passes.

He's jostled aware by a near silent hiss breath through clenched teeth, and when he glances around properly, he finds Schlatt wandering towards him, coat already on his shoulders. So much time has passed, and while Tommy feels a slight pang of annoyance for having wasted it, he also recognizes that there wasn't much he could do. Schlatt needed time to go through the bountiful information, including Tommy's massive document and the list of deviant traits.

Schlatt comes to a stop a few feet away from them, eyes flickering between the two of them. There's no disgust or confusion or disapproval. Only a mild curiosity that he doesn't seem inclined to act on. "Ready to go?" he asks, holding up the bag on his arm as an explanation.

Tommy nods slowly and pushes himself up. "Oh," he says, blinking in realization. "Right. Niki, this is Schlatt. He's—" he pauses, nearly imperceptible. "—my new partner." Niki sits up straighter, then, something like alarm coloring her features. "Schlatt, this is Niki." Thankfully, he doesn't need to say more. He already knows who she is because of his thorough explanations.

"Hey," Schlatt says, perfectly neutral. Tommy probes his face for some crack, for any evidence of the mask Quackity speaks fervently on, but there's nothing. Just a man meeting an android and having little to no thoughts about it. "We should go. It's supposed to snow later, and we have that stop to make."

Tommy's gut sinks at the reminder, but he nods all the same. With one last smile to Niki—who looks confused and panicked and achingly sad—he follows Schlatt out of the precinct and into the night.

Schlatt's car is dirtier than Wilbur's, somehow, and it smells of old takeout and cheap booze. That itself is familiar, and it's enough to make Tommy stiffen, even before they turn off the main road. These roads, and the houses that line them, are familiar to him, even in the dark.

They pull alongside Wilbur's house, and although light filters out through the crack in the curtains, it seems dull and lifeless. Techno's car isn't in the driveway, but there are recent tire tracks in the fresh snow, so he reasons that he's been here most of the day. For a moment, a familiar panic fills him at the thought of Wilbur—in an emotional, vulnerable state—alone in his empty house.

Schlatt steps out before the thought can fully materialize, and Tommy can do nothing else but follow.

Snowflakes land in his hair and on his face. There are many memories that the snow inspires—his first snow, their argument in the park, their drive there and back from Sam's—but his mind lingers in the moment.

Schlatt climbs the steps up the front porch, but, when he knocks, no one answers. It's quiet and cold, and a bitter wind whips straight through their clothes. Tommy shivers at the feeling of his thirium gradually slowing. With a glance back at him, Schlatt tries again. Tommy shifts from foot to foot, the house achingly familiar despite the distance he needs to put between it and himself.

When the second knock provides the same results, he presses the cracked doorbell. After several more seconds of dead silence, the door is yanked open. "Jesus, Techno, I told you—"

Wilbur stands in the doorway, haloed by the light of the kitchen. He looks much worse than Tommy's seen in a while—the bags under his eyes have returned full force, deep and purple and bruising, and his hair is tangled and knotted into a frizzy, disheveled mess. He stops dead in his tracks when his tired eyes take in his guests, and Tommy catches the way his fingers tighten around the door.

"Hey, buddy," Schlatt says, grinning despite the circumstances. Or maybe because.

Wilbur's eyes slide past Schlatt and land on Tommy, wide and with a set jaw. "What are you doing here?"

Tommy shrinks under his glare, tucking himself half behind Schlatt, who seems all too happy to have Wilbur's ire focused on him. Even from several feet apart, he can smell the alcohol radiating off of Wilbur, and something in his chest aches.

"We're here to collect Tommy's stuff." The neutral, efficient tone he's trying for does nothing to hide his utter *glee* at seeing Wilbur like this—shirt wrinkled and stained—and Tommy's heart sinks. This is what hides behind the mask Schlatt had so flawlessly presented—a cruelty so single-minded that it oozes poison.

It's so incredibly foreign to him.

Wilbur raises a brow. "Wow. You really traded up there, Toms," he says, and Tommy flinches at the nickname. Despite the clear reluctance painted over his tired face, Wilbur steps back, leaving the door open. It affords them a view of his living room, although it's covered in ripped-up pillow carcasses and their strewn-about guts. Looking further, he can see that the kitchen cabinets are speckled with shattered glass shards and more are scattered on the countertops.

The record player is missing from its spot of honor—dust has accumulated around it, exposing the damning spot where it once existed—and something shocks his system. He wonders if some of the shattered glass on the floor is actually splintered pieces of vinyl.

Wilbur moves about the living room with clinical efficiency. He sorts through piles of ripped-up clothes strewn along the hallway, occasionally shoving something under his arm. He unplugs Tommy's charging port from the wall and adds it to the growing pile.

Meanwhile, Schlatt, apparently, grows discontent to stand in the doorway. He crosses the threshold, stepping in and looking around as if it was an alien planet. Wilbur looks up, showing his ire only through a glare and a scowl before he turns back to his task.

"I'll go get the thirium," Tommy says quietly, although he isn't sure if he's offering an explanation to Schlatt—who probably wouldn't even notice, drinking in Wilbur's frantic movements with dark eyes—or an apology to Wilbur—who flinches at his voice. He slips past Schlatt, down the narrow, dark hallway, and enters the quiet of the bathroom as if it's a sanctuary.

The uneasy feeling of *wrongness* itches under his skin. It's wrong to be in this house—the closest thing he'll ever have to a home—with shoes still on his feet, tracking mud and snow and betrayal into the house and on the carpet. It's wrong to be so stiff and wrapped still in his outer clothes. To tread carefully as if he was a stranger.

He knows this house, nearly as intimately as he does Wilbur. He knows the familiar buzz of the overhead lights, the tick of the clock in the kitchen, the scent that clings to the walls, the carpet, the cushions. He knows the layout, he knows each and every item's place.

He knows this home, but it's no longer his to share. No longer his to enjoy.

The bathroom is one of the cleanest rooms. There's very little of the carnage in the living room and kitchen, but Tommy does notice that the notes he lovingly stuck on the mirror are missing. Only one remains—'*I'm proud of you,*' his writing declares happily—but it's ripped right through the center and then hastily stuck back together with smudged tape.

Tommy bites his lip, pressure and heat growing behind his eyes. To quell some of that unnamed feeling, he tips forward, resting his forehead against the cool mirror. This close, the reflective surface lights up with the red of his LED.

When he finally comes out, bags of thirium held carefully in his hands, he doesn't feel any more stable. His mask is firmly back in place—and he had watched it descend, hand pressed against the mirror—but it doesn't make him feel any less raw.

Wilbur's door is open when he exits, and he stalls before giving the idea any conscious thought. More of the violence of the house invades his room. Clothes are strewn about, his sheets are ripped, and pillows are thrown across the room.

But what really gets him, the thing that has him sucking a sharp, whistling breath in through his teeth, is the sight of Wilbur's guitar, its desecrated, mangled corpse lying amongst more shattered glass. "*Wilbur,*" he breathes before he can stop himself, the weight of the world and his raw, unrefined feelings leaking through. The baseboard is completely snapped from the body of the guitar, and it's the only part of it that's still recognizable.

The rest of it is, presumably, wood chips lost to dark floors and piles of scrapped fabric.

Wilbur stills despite himself, eyes instinctually seeking out whatever it is that made Tommy react so harshly. His face closes off when he spots the mutilated guitar, and he looks away before Tommy is given the chance to read his eyes. "You've got what you came for." He shoves the assorted clothes and tangled charger into Schlatt's hands. Then, he barges past Tommy—their shoulders knocking together as he passes—and slams the door to his room shut behind him.

Schlatt scoffs but exits quickly. Without Wilbur, there's no reason for him to stay.

But Tommy lingers a little longer, eyes glazed and unseeing and staring at the space where the record player used to be. He hopes—despite the fact that he *can't* hope—that he tucked it away for safe-keeping, like it was when Tommy found it.

Then, gathering the frayed edges of his self-control, he follows after Schlatt.

The drive to his place is short but no less stifling. Schlatt's mood is like a pendulum; it swings frequently between pleased satisfaction and disappointment that he didn't get to squeeze more suffering from Wilbur. They arrive quickly, climbing up the steps of an old, brick apartment building to the third floor.

Schlatt's place is small and condensed, decorated with a sort of mid-century modern minimalism that doesn't remind him at all of the house they just fled. The door opens up to a living room with a small kitchen visible from the door. A hallway leads to what he can only assume is a bedroom, and there's a door off the living room that opens to a small yet clean bathroom.

Things still gathered in his arms from when Schlatt dumped them on him, Tommy enters. It's nice, in a clean, detached sort of way, and it lacks the warm lights and the subtle personality that Wilbur's had. There's no scent other than faint smoke and disinfectant.

With nothing else to do, he sinks down onto the couch. It's firm and smells new—yellow fabric with no soft give to speak of. No age-earned lumps or tears or oddly-shaped stains.

"What are you doing?"

Tommy glances up.

Schlatt lingers by the kitchen, a bottle of beer in his hands. The top is already popped off—the rim already wet with his saliva. There's something new in his face, or rather there's something missing from it. Something lacking.

Tommy falters, subconsciously clenching his items closer to his chest.

"I hate to be an asshole," he says, in a tone that is unreadable but not unkind. "But I kind of use that couch. I can't have you hogging it up all the time."

"Oh," Tommy says, blinking. After a moment, he shoves himself up. "No, yeah. Of course." He glances around the room, spying an outlet between the TV and the door to the bathroom. "Sorry, Wil—Lieutenant Soot insisted I take the couch. But, obviously, I don't need it." He crosses the room, sinking down onto the floor. Cold seeps through his thin pants.

"Good." Schlatt nods, pleased. "Night, then." With a hand wrapped protectively around the neck of the bottle, he retreats down the hall. A door slams shut behind him.

Tommy hesitantly sets his meager belongings—already far too much; androids aren't meant to own things—on the floor next to him.

Everything will be fine, he assures himself half-heartedly as he sorts through his things. There are a few dress shirts, two pairs of slacks, his sweatpants, a casual t-shirt, a sweatshirt —

Tommy freezes when he spots the sweatshirt. In his haste, Wilbur had accidentally included one of his own sweatshirts—the one that Tommy most frequently borrowed. Sinking his teeth

into his bottom lip, he runs his fingers across the soft fabric. It's old, whatever print on the front of it worn away with time. He slips it over his head without a second thought, taking in comfort from its warmth and the smell of Wilbur that clings to it.

Tommy tips his head back, skull colliding with the wall. He has to close his eyes against the sudden wave of pain and the increased prickling in his eyes.

Everything will be fine. It has to.

Chapter End Notes

We're really in it now, folks :) I devised this little angst detour pretty early on into planning, and I was absolutely delighted by it. Obviously, I understand that not everyone is so pleased, but I do really like writing Schlatt! He's very easy for me to conceptualize.

For those of you who cannot read angst without some kind of resolution, I understand. This angst detour will only last a few chapters before we resume our regularly scheduled content. Feel free to hold out until then. As for those of you who brave the trenches, god speed. I'll see you on the other side.

a predator's grin

Chapter Summary

Everything is going fine. Until it isn't.

Chapter Notes

TW: briefly mentioned concerns over suicide, a little bit of physical violence

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Chapter Thirty-Three: A Predator's Grin

December 16th, 2038

2:38 PM

"Working with Schlatt is..." Tommy trails off, linking his fingers together over the metal table as he fruitlessly searches for the words. It's odd to be back here, in the interrogation room, but he figures that he can only have so many cell-side chats with Niki before the looks from the other officers become overbearing.

Working with Schlatt is, comparatively, nothing like working with Wilbur.

Wilbur is easily distracted. He's tired by life and the early hours, and he would much rather be in bed than at some crime scene, wheedling details from uncooperative witnesses. He had changed, eventually, as he became more invested in the case, but even then, their health—their *happiness*—had always come first.

Schlatt is the exact opposite.

He's ruthlessly efficient; no matter what state he wound up in the night before—drunk, more often than not, which is one of the only characteristics his two partners share—he always manages to haul himself out of bed. He has a routine and he sticks to it—three eggs cracked in a pan with far too much salt poured on them, toast, lightly burned, and a protein shake on the side for breakfast; after that, a quick jog, a shower, and they're out the door. Tommy still

isn't sure if he actually does the kind of working out that usually requires a protein shake, but the man is obsessed with it.

As opposed to Wilbur, working with Schlatt is...

A million words pop into his mind.

Refreshing, he could say, because it's nice to work with someone that holds a very similar work ethic to his own. Schlatt keeps his mind on what's important, only takes mandatory breaks for food and the bathroom, and writes in a manner that keeps his notebook clean and organized.

Interesting, he might say, because Schlatt is nothing if not interesting. He's quick to crack a joke, no matter how dark or iffy the subject matter, but he's also smart as a whip, and just as quick to school his face. In that manner—the ever-shifting expressions on his face—he's somewhat like Quackity. He can see why they got along at first, even if he can't quite see why they suddenly didn't.

A change for the better, he'll probably say, because it's the only truth he's allowed to acknowledge.

Niki stares at him all the same—unwavering, patient, and with that same unreadable undertone that Tommy is quickly learning to ignore. She watches him as he wrestles with his words, as he runs his tongue over the sharp edge of his teeth in consideration.

"Different," is what he ultimately settles on.

They've only had one case to work on—an odd one, to say the least, where at least a dozen androids had gotten up and walked out of a Cyberlife store all on their own—but the differences between him and Wilbur are stark to see for anyone with one working eye.

Niki watches him expectantly. The more time they spend together—and they seem to be doing a lot of that, now that Tommy's only other confidant is *Schlatt*, who doesn't seem inclined to talk much outside of work—the more in tune Niki becomes with him. The delicate intricacies of his inner mind, the different itches along his skin—she knows them all.

And so, as the silence stretches between them, she watches him because she knows that isn't all.

"He's—" Tommy rolls the weight of different words along his tongue, deciding which fate he'll seal himself into. If he doesn't tell her what's pressing on his mind, he's in for an unsatisfying conversation overshadowed by what he refuses to say. "Well, he likes to do things a certain way."

"He's controlling," Niki fills in for him, easily reading in between the lines of his careful speech, as always.

"I suppose... that could be one word for it." He dips his head down, watching the way his nails pick at the surrounding skin. It's an unfortunate habit—one too human, and too

reminiscent of Wilbur for his comfort—and it only ever results in blue-stained fingers. Still, he can't quite find it within himself to stop. "He's very insistent that, despite his addition to the case still being new, he knows everything there is to know."

"He's arrogant," she deciphers. "And a know-it-all."

"He's not a know-it-all." He's not. Schlatt is... well, Tommy prefers to say that he's too enthusiastic. He's desperate to dip his hands into the filthy grit of the case that he, in his haste, often neglects Tommy's bountiful well of knowledge. He forgets the tools in his arsenal and forges on ahead, leaving Tommy to play catch up. "And it's not... even a bad thing. It's just something I have to get used to."

"Wilbur wasn't like this."

His jaw involuntarily tightens, teeth grinding together to stop the knee-jerk reaction he has to the name. "No, but Lieutenant Soot wasn't nearly as efficient, either. Some change is good, and this? This is a necessary one."

She watches him with her all-knowing, piercing eyes. "Necessary doesn't equal good. Nor does it equal *wanted*."

With narrowed eyes, Tommy doesn't even deign that nonsense with a reply. Instead, he sorts through the messy details of their latest case—and his only one, thus far, with Schlatt.

It had all been pretty routine upon responding to the incident report of one very distressed Cyberlife store manager. Tommy had walked a respectful foot behind Schlatt, hovering behind his shoulder like a too-tall shadow. Several times, he caught his steps quickening automatically, his strides falling into step with Schlatt's until they were almost shoulder to shoulder. An unfortunate—and inappropriate—habit that wasn't easily curbed.

Upon arrival, the store was, as the report claimed, devoid of any and all androids. The manager had spelled it all out to them with hands twisting and wringing together—how the androids in the store had gotten up simultaneously and without a trigger, how the crowds of people had parted for them, the useless commands that slipped right off their backs. The altercation with security.

They had talked to the security guard as well—a stocky woman with an ugly purple bruise along her jaw, a black eye, a cut along her hairline—but there were no inconsistencies between the stories. Neither of them remarked on anything odd—like a certain deviant leader popping up out of nowhere to liberate the masses—nor did any of the androids show any signs of deviancy prior.

Despite the abundance of cameras in the corners of the store and through the rest of the mall, there was no usable footage during their impromptu strike, for lack of a better word. The androids had clearly been smart enough and skilled enough to mess with the cameras. The only evidence of their presence was the dozens of eyewitnesses, the bruises on the security guard's face, and a trail of thirium starting at the entrance.

Tommy had followed it pretty far, but—despite its continuation—he had been called back by an irritated Schlatt. Apparently, he deemed the investigation 'a fucking waste of time' and, oblivious to his protests and the evidence, they left.

It was fine, though. If the androids were smart enough to hack into the cameras, then they definitely wouldn't go anywhere important while leaving a trail of bloody-blue breadcrumbs smattered on the pavement. It would lead them into the heart of the city and then disappear. Honestly, Schlatt probably did them a favor. As he said, their time was valuable, and this lead was one that probably wasn't worth pursuing.

Probably.

"It's just something I have to get used to," he says, again, for lack of anything better to say and for a fear of the growing, stretching silence between them. The metal table is cool under his flattened palms, and he focuses on that instead of Niki's burning gaze. "He's good for the case. We had been... slipping, previously."

There's a clock on the wall, but the sound is all wrong; it isn't the steady, familiar tick of the clock in Wilbur's kitchen. It's too fast, too light—like it's purposefully trying to be unobtrusive, but instead draws more attention to it. He frowns at it and at the alarming, flickering lights in the ceiling.

When he eventually returns his attention to Niki, she's staring at him with an unnamed, unknown look. "Is that really such a bad thing?"

"Bad thing—Niki, our productivity was shit. At the rate we were going, it was only a matter of time before the FBI took it off our hands." Where Tommy may or may not have been wanted. He knows that Cyberlife put a lot of their faith in him, but even he doesn't know the outcome if the FBI refused his counsel. Would his creators toss in the towel and discard him like another useless creation? Did it even matter?

He thinks it does, but the low buzz at the base of his spine indicates maybe not. Instead of dwelling, he blinks to re-focus his eyes.

"At least this way, when we're making progress and working on the case, they'll have a much harder time prying it out of our hands."

Niki presses her lips together. It sharpens the harsh lines of her angular face and makes her look much more cross than she actually is. "I still don't like it," she says, although at this point, the thread of conversation is slipping through his gaping fingers. He can't be sure if she's talking about his mission—not a new topic of complaint, although it hits a little closer to home than usual if so—or about Schlatt again. Ever since he introduced the two of them, Niki has been expressing her disapproval nonstop. "I don't trust him."

Well that's not surprising. "You didn't trust Wi—Lieutenant Soot either but now..." The sentence hangs, limp and unfinished, between them. It hurts too much to think about—the trust Niki and Wilbur had fostered, the bond they had created despite all odds. His nails dig into the fabric of his shirt, right over his pounding thirium pump. Without having to check, he knows they line up with the thin, silvery scars on his chassis.

"That's because Wilbur gave me a reason to trust him. Because even at his worst, he—he was better than *this*." Niki makes a face, nose scrunched up and mouth twisted in a scowl. "He didn't feel slimy or dishonest. He didn't look at me with apathy as a poor disguise for something else. Something worse."

Tommy frowns.

Wilbur had been all about give and take. In the beginning, he had demanded that he alone lead the investigation—a pitiful attempt to regain some control over his broken life, no doubt—but he had slowly eased up as he learned to trust Tommy and his judgement. They had resembled something like actual partners, and eventually the power dynamic between them evened out until they had equal say on investigations. And, as time continued, Tommy—more often than not—took the lead, spear-headed them forward with his drive.

Schlatt is... well, he's not *dissimilar*.

Tommy looks at Schlatt, and he sees a lot of the same issues as Wilbur; no family to fall back on, a lonely, empty house, a drinking problem, and some kind of fixation on work. Schlatt takes control in the same way that Wilbur used to, and Tommy can tell that it's for a very similar reason—a loss of control, or maybe it's as simple as a desperation to see the ripples of the rock he just tossed on the surface of the water. To see that his actions have effects.

They're similar, but not.

Schlatt is stubborn and demanding and sometimes cruel. It's hard to spot at first, but it lies, hidden, in the words he uses to speak of other people. He'll lean over, hand covering his mouth like he's concerned about lip readers, and he'll whisper snide comments to Tommy. He belittles others constantly, but in ways that aren't obvious.

He belittles *Tommy* constantly. He would make him useless, rob him of his mission by giving him mundane chores—paperwork and coffee and fetching him lunch when he's too busy. But the worst part is how he hides his cruelty behind polite smiles that almost always meet his eyes and behind fluffy words like "You always make the coffee so much better than I do" or "I know this mission is important to you, which is why I can't spare a single second to grab lunch."

Words like that, spoken in his soft, friendly tone, are a slow poison. They work through the veins like sludge, and, just as Quackity said, it's hard to spot their ill effects until they've stopped the heart.

Tommy sighs, and it oozes out from between clenched teeth. "I'm not asking you to trust him."

She leans forward, dipping her head until their eyes connect. "Then what are you asking of me?"

Trust. Affection. Friendship. Things no android should want or need or allow even a second of consideration. "I'm not asking anything of you," he says instead of letting his mind linger

on the dissonance of his thoughts. "Schlatt is not Lieutenant Soot, but he *is* my partner now. It would be nice if you could at least be as apathetic as you claim he's pretending to be."

Niki considers this with a tilted head. When she seems to come to a decision, she slides her hand, palm-up, across the table towards him.

Without hesitation, Tommy takes it. It's nice to feel her system so close after days of feeling it through thick plexiglass. Her fingers slide along his sweat-slick palm until they come to a rest on the inside of his wrist, pressing, gently, into his beating pulse. After a few seconds, her skin retracts, and Tommy finds himself mindlessly copying her.

As soon as their bare chassis meet, it's like an electrical shock directly to his system. Tommy jolts, but, when he goes to pull back, he finds that her fingers and his are tightened, digging into the plastic of their bare hands. It's like touching a live wire—information seeps from her hand to his, but it's not any ordinary information. Snippets of memories—of Carlos's fists hitting her skin, cigarette butts scorching her arms, bloodied hands cupping delicate flower petals—flash behind his fluttering eyelids. He feels her pain like it's his own, her anger like it's a torch under his heart, her fear like it's a bitter drink dripping down the back of his throat.

Tommy yanks his hand back like he's been burned, chest heaving and ears ringing. His eyes dart up to Niki's to find his own shock mirrored in her impossibly wide eyes. "Tommy—" she says, insistent and important and with a heavy weight to the word.

But whatever she has to say, he doesn't think he wants to hear it. He stands up, sparing one moment of stillness and silence and wide eyes meeting together in confusion and realization and heavy implications, before he flees.

December 19th, 2038

3:47 PM

Things don't get better.

Well, not *really*. Saying that makes it sound like things are bad, like they had been *good* before, and that just isn't possible. Before, Tommy had been wasting time on Sunday dinners and therapy persuasions, and he was doing little to no work on the case. And now...

Well, now, Tommy doesn't have any of those things. He doesn't have Wilbur's knee pressed against his as they struggle to fit on his tiny, battered couch, and he doesn't have his grin when Tommy manages to strike the perfect joke—just a hint of sharp teeth, eyes crinkled around the corners, brows fluctuating like he can't quite decide if he wants to laugh or smother the instinct—and he doesn't have Wilbur.

Not any more.

It's dishonest to say things don't get better, because they aren't *bad*, and they weren't *good* before, because they *weren't*. They can't be. If he enjoyed his time while it slipped between his gaping fingers, if he smiled and laughed and the tension eased out of his shoulders when he wasn't working on his case, his *mission*, then what was he created for? What a waste of plastic and wires and precious scrap and his developers' time.

But things weren't good before. And things aren't bad now. They're *just*, like a planet that's finally been reset on its axis. The world is upright, and it spins to capture the sunlight, and people keep moving, streaming past him when Schlatt drives them from his lonely apartment to the lonely precinct.

What he's trying to say, or rather, trying to *think* is that... the world keeps moving. The earth turns round and round, and life goes on. Changing partners isn't the end of the world. It isn't even anywhere close, because this is *good*. Things are... good. His mission is the only apple of his eye, so on and so forth, and Schlatt is a good partner.

Or well, he's not a good partner—good partners don't make him feel like the scum on the bottom of a shoe, and they don't make him doubt himself when the only thing that comes out of their mouth is sugary sweet words—but he's an efficient partner, and that's all he really needs.

That's all he really needs.

Things don't get better, but they do keep going. The world doesn't collapse because Wilbur isn't his partner anymore. In fact, Tommy hasn't even seen Wilbur since that fateful night in his house, where they stood with an uncrossable chasm between them, filled with splintered guitar pieces and shredded up post-it notes in a stunning hot pink. He didn't show up to work the next day, nor any other one since.

And Tommy is worried, in that vague, distant way that his system can actually justify. He's programmed to prevent the loss of life, and it's always an unpleasant thought that he might've *failed* at something. He's not too worried, though—Techno keeps coming in, and the bags under his eyes speak of a tired stress that comes from taking care of a sick relative and not...

Not someone dealing with the grief of a lost brother.

Tommy finds whatever small comfort that notion holds and tries to avoid Techno's accusing, pitying stares as he darts to and fro, carrying coffee cups and stacks of paper and brown paper bags like a shaky intern. He finds that he has to do a lot of avoiding, nowadays. He avoids Phil when he comes out of his office for his daily check-up, and he avoids Schlatt when he gets too frustrated, and he avoids Quackity's friendly smile, and he avoids Niki's all-seeing eyes as they track him across the bullpen.

He avoids the thoughts of Wilbur, no matter if they're happy or bitter memories. Both are painful and cause a sort of short-term dysfunction that Tommy still hasn't found a cure for. Usually, he just shoves whatever feelings they bring down into the pit of his stomach and focuses on the cases pouring in.

They still haven't had a case that reeks of Tubbo and his rebellion, not since Tommy chased down his ghost in a cramped, damp sewer. He's laying low, or so Tommy thinks. Regaining his wits, planning.

It makes him antsy, as much as everything else does. He isn't allowed to help out too much, not since Schlatt took over, and it makes him pace around the bullpen like a caged tiger. There's too much energy trapped in his veins, and he doesn't dare rely on the coin burning a hole through his pocket for help. He doesn't need help. He doesn't need a crutch.

So Tommy paces, and he thinks, and worries about Tubbo's next move, and he plots everything out as much as Tubbo must surely be. It's like a long-distance game of chess, except Tommy can't be sure that he isn't the only player. Or that he even knows the rules.

Chess pieces on a board. Hidden strategy. Clever foes.

Does Tubbo even know he exists? Surely, he must; they are fated enemies, after all, but Tommy can't be sure that isn't just in his head either.

He can't be sure of anything, nowadays.

So he paces, and he fetches coffee, and he thinks about Tubbo, and he avoids thinking about Wilbur, and he avoids everybody and their mother and he—

He keeps on living, if it can even be called that. If he can even be called alive.

Sometimes, he talks with Dream. Their conversations are stilled, the unacknowledged tension growing between them only spurred on by the forced proximity. The air is so cold outside, and despite the recent thawing of the lake, the bitter iciness to the air suggests a snowstorm looming on the horizon. Instead, they hole up in the community house, putting as much physical distance between them as they possibly can without it seeming suspicious.

Dream seems pleased with his change. He says he's proud of Tommy, and he runs his hand through his hair like he used to. But Tommy has long since stopped responding to his words. Instead, he ducks his head and ignores the feeling of vague nausea that rolls through his body in destructive, everlasting waves.

But Dream likes Schlatt—as much as he's capable of liking anyone—and he consistently praises his efficiency, as well as his single-minded focus. He applauds Schlatt for everything he is and for everything Wilbur is not, and he puffs up like a pleased bird at whatever imaginary results he thinks they're getting now that they weren't getting before because the truth is—

The truth is that nothing has changed. Not truly.

Cases still continue to pour in, and they find no new deviants. Schlatt is efficient, yes, but his time-saving devotion is undercut by the fact that he simply refuses to utilize Tommy. They go to case after case, and Tommy is forced to linger in the background, hands tucked behind his back like a good little android as he simply watches. As Schlatt questions victims, as Schlatt

combs over a crime scene with narrowed eyes, as Schlatt determines where the deviant must have run, despite the thirium trail Tommy catches leading the other way.

He watches and he waits and he tries not to think about Wilbur. Oh, and sometimes he fetches coffee.

He's doing just that when the steady routine they'd slowly built comes crashing down. When his tiny, minuscule list of tasks becomes a lot harder.

The coffee smells as it always does, rich and thick and stale with the cheapness of the beans. Tommy's learning to resent that smell, but he does savor the feeling of the hot ceramic against his skin, burning and stinging but always just a few degrees shy of melting and sizzling. It's grounding in a way that he needs now more than ever—his days of mindless grunt work have left him feeling untethered, and not even the cold, hard ground he sleeps on nowadays is enough to do the trick.

It's as he rounds the corner, fingers perpetually stinging from the constant heat, that he spots Wilbur.

It's much later than he's slowly become accustomed to Wilbur showing up, and it's been a few days that Tommy's had to adjust to not seeing him at all, so to say it's a shock to walk into the crowded bullpen to see him... well, that's an understatement.

He looks like shit. There's no easy way to say that—or any way at all; it's hard to articulate even only in his thoughts when everything slows like molasses just at the sight of him—because he just looks like shit. The bags under his eyes have not lessened at all—ugly brown impressions sunken into his skin—and that, with the addition of his red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes, creates a vision of true exhaustion.

Wilbur doesn't look at anyone as he walks in, bag already slipping down his shoulder. He rubs his temples, the bridge of his nose under his crooked, shattered glasses—and that's something else, something new and sad—anything his fingers can reach. He keeps his head ducked down, knotted hair falling over his pale face like a curtain. From the tension in his drawn-up shoulders, he's clearly wary of the many eyes that linger on him, trailing him as he walks, with efficient steps, through the precinct.

Techno trails behind him, face molded into something a lot less telling. But Tommy is slowly, miraculously, used to reading him. Despite the apathy he wears like a mask—*"apathy as a poor disguise for something else, something worse"* Niki had said, but Tommy doesn't want to think about anything from that cursed interaction—his concern is painted over his face. In his eyebrows, unusually low if only by a centimeter, and in the minute twitch of his lips.

After a moment of pure leering—and there really is no other word for the way he stands, stock still and gaping, fingers pressed against the ceramic even though it burns him—Tommy pulls the ragged edges of himself together once again. He stands still for as long as it takes Wilbur to settle down at his desk, and then he's off, feet carrying him quickly along his usual path—walking the line against the wall and approaching Schlatt's desk from the far way.

He doesn't need to look anywhere but into the rippling mug of coffee to know that he garners much attention. He can feel the persistent gaze of Quackity on the back of his head as well as catch a few reckless glances from Wilbur out of the corner of his eye.

As Tommy sets the mug down carefully on the napkin placed exactly for this reason, Schlatt pushes his chair out enough to watch Wilbur around Tommy. That predatory grin is back on his face, eyes narrowed and observing. Looking for a single moment of hesitation, a chink in his proverbial armor.

And Wilbur is full of them. A mosaic of shattered pieces of himself reluctantly glued back together in the wrong spots.

"Oh, hey pal," Schlatt calls out as if he just now spotted Wilbur, hunched over his desk and scowling at his computer when its bright light illuminates his face. He leverages one hand against the desk to push himself up. Tommy can only watch as he crosses the minuscule space between his desk and Wilbur's.

Despite the unavailability of Schlatt—looking at him, it's easy to see how everything about him was carefully cultivated to garner attention, to avoid disregard—Wilbur ignores him. He sits with his cheek pressed against the palm of his hand and with eyes that rove over his computer screen, blank and glazed and their movement only for show.

Even Tommy, as distant as he is, can tell it's only for show.

But Schlatt only seems to find amusement in their little game. His grin stretches, like a predator getting ready to give chase. To hunt. "You don't okay, buddy?" he asks, faux concern painted over his face in an obvious—but no less *real*—mask. His eyes are cruel and hard, narrowed and fixated on Wilbur's face. Like an anteater's snout probing the ground for prey.

Again, Wilbur ignores him. He takes a hold of the mouse on his desk, tapping it impatiently when it doesn't work, like Tommy knows it's wont to do.

"Aw, what's the matter?" Schlatt lowers his voice to a pale mimicry of the intimacy they once shared. He leans in close, hand carefully levered on the edge of Wilbur's desk so he can lower himself.

But even with his face mere inches from Wilbur's, Wilbur still manages to ignore him. If he didn't know better, he might even say he looks *bored*.

But Tommy does know him better, and the occasional, *telling* twitch in his brow gives him away.

"Are you still sad I stole your partner?"

Even from a dozen feet away, Tommy feels every artificial muscle in his artificial body become taut. His fingers twitch, and, not for the first time—not even for the hundredth—he finds himself longing for the coin in his pocket. He ducks his head quickly, instead focusing on rearranging the messy papers spread out on Schlatt's desk. He doesn't dare look at them, save for out of the corner of his eyes, and his ears burn with the heat of their combined gaze.

"And although I would love to be able to take credit for that..." he continues, trailing off with a smirk that bares the slightest hint of sharp teeth. A threat, maybe, or simply a confirmation. He laughs lightly, head-turning just so to indicate who he's talking about. "It seems, in the end, that I didn't have to do anything other than exist. Your partner took care of everything."

Wilbur doesn't quite flinch, but something in his face shudders. Hardens.

Still, he doesn't say anything.

"How messed up are you... that even an android built to adapt to any situation couldn't stomach you for longer than a few months." He laughs, sharp and bitter. "This surely must be a new record for you. The fastest abandonment yet."

He can't stay here. He can't keep listening in on this conversation, eyes locked on Schlatt's desk when the entirety of his focus is actually located a few feet away. He can't keep standing here, pretending to sort Schlatt's perfectly organized desk. He needs to work. He needs to be useful.

Tommy doesn't move, other than allowing his hands to still on a stack of useless papers.

Schlatt grins, so and utterly pleased with himself and the situation. "Tell me—" he says, and it sounds like a command. "—how does it feel to know that truly nobody can stand you? That everyone around you leaves? That your fancy little android partner prefers my company to yours? That he's so desperate to get away from you?" He tilts his head, frustration seeping out the edges of his mask when that line of questioning yields nothing. Hardly even a twitch of the eye or a twinge of his taut jaw. "That you can't help but drive everyone away."

Bullseye.

There's some kind of change in Wilbur. A little shudder in his face. Something in his eyes that looks more closed off than before, like he's afraid that if he doesn't hold his emotions in white-knuckled fists then Schlatt will be able to sniff it out.

Unfortunately for him, it's still a reaction, and it's all the ammunition—all the *goadings*—that Schlatt needs.

"Please, enlighten me on how it feels to be such a *failure*. To drive away your wife, your father, your brother." Wilbur doesn't react, although Tommy is sure he isn't the only one who has noticed the way his nails dig into his palms. Yet another tell in a long, terrible list. "And now an android? An android you didn't even *want*."

The reminder stings. It shouldn't, but it still does.

Something slimy and pleased lights up Schlatt's face. "But now? Oh, Wilbur, you're so easy to read." He laughs, shaking his head. "The clothes? The affection? The nickname? You might as well have plastered your care for him across a fucking billboard. Sucks that you cared for the one thing that can't love you back." He tilts his head, taking in Wilbur's tight, unyielding expression. "Or maybe that's part of the appeal? So worried about being abandoned again that you only allowed yourself to show affection for something that can't

even return it." Schlatt grins, voice dripping with barbed sympathy when he says, "Now that is just pitiful."

Wilbur's jaw is clenched so tightly, a vein popping out of his forehead. But still, he is deadly calm when he turns his head ever so slightly to the side, to meet the victory painted across Schlatt's face. "Well at least I wasn't a second choice," he says with a kind of weighted finality. The grin slips right off his face. "Even when I didn't want the damn thing—" that stings. "—even when I protested so hard against it—" that stings even more. "Phil. Chose. *Me*. And you?" He grins then, dangerous and feral. "You were just an afterthought."

And just like that, the expression slips off his face. Wilbur turns back to his computer, neutrality back firmly in place, and starts typing.

After a moment—a tense, poised moment—Schlatt turns around and stalks away. His face darkens when he catches Tommy watching them—or maybe it's just the sight alone that bitters him so—but he doesn't say anything. Instead, he roughly grabs the mug, takes a sip of coffee, and sets it back down hard enough to send some of the coffee sloshing over the rim.

"It's cold," he spits out as he settles back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest like a petulant child. Tommy sighs and grabs the mug, carrying it back towards the break room.

The rest of the day is uneventful, save for Tommy having to avoid Wilbur now. It's not hard, though. It seems, from his downcast gaze and twitchy fingers, that Wilbur wants to avoid him as well.

No, it isn't until they get back to Schlatt's apartment that all the tidy things begin to unravel.

Schlatt is visibly—words cycle through his head, but none of them really fit; he has to settle for the next best thing—*different*. He usually keeps such a tight hold on his emotions, at least as far as Tommy has seen, but now his mask is slipping. His eyebrows twitch periodically, as if he's fighting them against the expression they naturally want to assume. His mouth does it, too. Small, almost unnoticeable spasms.

He doesn't say anything to break the tense silence. Instead, he sits on the couch, elbows digging into the soft skin of his thighs and chin propped up by his interlocking fingers.

And then he stares at the empty TV, eyes still and stationary. Fixed on his own warped reflection's eyes.

Tommy tries not to stare, but it's hard. It's hard when his little perch is faced towards the couch, and it's hard when the apartment is so, for lack of a better word, *boring*. It's hard when nothing ever happens in the still, whiteness of the apartment, and when Schlatt is—despite the uneasy feeling settling in the pit of his gut—being so *interesting*. Odd.

Eventually, he must find whatever it is he was looking for—or he just gets so completely and utterly bored of searching and coming up with no answers—because he lets a big breath trickle out through his teeth and stands up. Tommy watches him as he moves on auto-pilot, feet carrying him towards his barebones kitchen so he can pry open the fridge and down a bottle of beer.

And so it goes.

Tommy watches as he consumes drink after drink, counting the bottle caps as they rattle and spin on the marble counter. It's almost achingly familiar in that way, and Tommy is standing before he's even thinking, eyes trained on the empty bottles that litter the space around the sink. Schlatt glances at him when he catches sight of the movement, although he doesn't say much. At first.

"Who does he think he is?" he says after too long, lips pulled into a sullen frown around the rim of yet another bottle. "I mean, yeah he was first choice. Because of fucking nepotism."

Of course he's talking about Wilbur. Of course. Tommy can't seem to escape him, no matter what he does.

"Fucking *nepotism*. That job should've been mine. Your plastic ass should've been mine before it was ever his." An odd train of thought, truly, and one that was surely attributed to the slight glaze to his eyes. He had an urge to rant and no mind to pay for what words filled the air. "Nobody cares about that goddamn station." Tommy could read between the lines: *not like I care*. "They all sit on their fat asses, content to watch as our precious captain drives it into the fucking ground with his unfit spawn."

As his anger sparks, chest heaving with the words he spits out between sips, the air takes on a heavy quality. Tommy swallows around his unease and takes a step forward. Schlatt doesn't bother to watch him anymore, eyes trailing the seam where the ceiling and walls meet. "Who does he think he is?" he says again, lip curling back to reveal his teeth. A predator's grin. "He thinks he's so much better than us. The scum beneath his shoe. I'll show him." He trails off into incoherently mumblings, eyes lidded as he imagines whatever fate he must have in store.

Tommy catches—barely above the hum of a distant fan—Schlatt repeating those words: *I'll show him*. He tries not to let that feeling sink into his artificial guts, but he doesn't do a very good job. He takes another step towards Schlatt, and this one he notices. "Maybe you should go to bed," he says, tone carefully—artificially—optimistic. "It won't do anyone any good to be drinking so much."

"Oh, it won't, will it?" he sneers, biting—almost spitefully—at the glass rim of the bottle. His teeth clack against it with a painful sound. "And who says I'm trying to do anyone good?"

He falters, mind whirring as the tension in Schlatt's body seems to ebb and flow. When his muscles aren't so clenched, Tommy continues until he enters the kitchen, pausing only when he's on the same side of the counter. The fridge is slightly ajar, and it casts a single strip of light on the linoleum floors. "We have work tomorrow." He reaches out slowly, at first, and watches the way Schlatt's eyes track the movement. "Just because you can go to work hungover doesn't mean you have to."

Schlatt is deadly still, save for the heaving of his chest and the slight sway of his body as the alcohol pumps through his veins.

When Tommy's fingers curl around the neck of the bottle, he reacts sharply, instinctively. His hand jerks out, palm pressed against his shoulder. He pushes then, lips curled back into a

snarl, and—in his drunken stupor—puts just a little too much weight into the movement. It sends Tommy lurching back, steps wobbly and uneven, and—in a desperate attempt to regain his balance—his body crashes into the counter. The edge hits his bony hip, sending a jolt through his body as if touching a severed wire.

He makes a low noise of protest, hands scrabbling at the smooth marble, but it does no good. His momentum sends him crashing to the ground, limbs askew and head banging into the floor.

And for a moment, they just stare at each other.

Schlatt's eyes are wide, something like clarity diffusing some of the drunken haze. His chest still heaves, and his fingers turn white from where they grip the beer bottle. Then, as suddenly as his stupor came upon him, he jolts into action. "Holy shit, kid," he says, crouching down to help him up and ignoring the instinctive flinch. "That was... Maybe you're right. I should stop drinking."

The area that hit the counter feels raw. Tommy runs his fingers over it despite the clothes in the way. "Yeah," he agrees quietly, LED blinking yellow.

Whatever twists his face isn't quite apologetic or even guilty, but Schlatt does look uneasy. He steps away from Tommy, putting his half-empty beer bottle into the fridge before walking around the counter. He pauses. "I— I feel like I should apologize," he says, frowning. "To be fair, though, it isn't your job to tell me what to do. I've been taking care of myself for years now."

Tommy swallows but says nothing, and, eventually, Schlatt shambles to his room. Despite his words, Tommy can't help but notice that he never did apologize.

December 22nd, 2038

5:57 PM

Time passes like the grains of sand in an hourglass. Tommy continues playing along, although he remains quietly dissatisfied with his role as the overqualified assistant to a less than adequate detective.

The days grow grayer and colder with the imminent approach of Christmas. The office slowly comes alive with the holiday spirit, faces look redder and rosier by the second as everyone anticipates dinners and desserts and sugared fucking plums.

All faces, of course, except for Schlatt's—who is perpetually sullen, it seems, since Wilbur's harsh and necessary dismissal of him—Wilbur's, Tommy's, and Techno's. They alone seem resistant to whatever holiday cheer was spiked in everyone's coffee.

Today itself is somewhat of a slow day. The cases have slowed, at least a little bit, although Tommy can't quite discern the cause. Do deviants even celebrate Christmas?

He asked Niki during one of their—now daily—chats, but all he received for his trouble is a thoroughly unimpressed look. He doesn't dare ask again, though, and he finds himself skirting around more and more conversation topics. She seems testier since Wilbur was removed from the case—antsy with an unplaceable energy, fingers always twisting strands of her limp hair.

Despite the fact that today is one of their last shifts for a few days—Tommy does dread the thought of what he'll do over the break; already, his skin itches with his uselessness—he decides, after only a moment of thought, not to pay her a visit. Restless energy continues its jolly tap dance under his skin, and he can't imagine how well *that* will go over.

Which leaves him idling by Schlatt's desk, fetching subpar coffee, and generally being no fucking use to anyone.

It's fine, though. If this is what's needed to solve the case—it can't be; Schlatt doesn't have the intimate understanding of the case that Wilbur and he do, and he absolutely refuses to utilize Niki as the resource she is—then it's what he needs to do.

He just thinks it would be better—for the case and for the dull boredom thrumming against his skin—if he was put to use in other, more helpful ways.

But no. Schlatt barely looks at him when he finally returns from fetching his fifth cup of coffee—at some point, it became a mind game; how many times can the android re-make a cup of coffee? Spoiler: *a fucking lot*—a sends him off another inane task. This time, he's meant to retrieve some evidence he's pretty sure doesn't exist from the locker.

When Tommy steps inside, he's immediately tense, shoulders drawn up near his ears. Although it isn't the same locker that hosted his last conversation with Wilbur, it looks nearly identical. Grey concrete walls, harsh lights, a barren wasteland save for the terminal awaiting a password.

The very sight of it instantly brings up some deep, residual sickness in him. He tries to ignore it, despite the sudden shakiness of his hands, but it only grows harder with time. Still, he approaches the terminal, pushing in the password even when it takes a few attempts, and he watches as the wall in front of him drops. In its absence, row after row of the evidence they've—that is to say, *Wilbur and Tommy*—compiled stands.

He lets his eyes scan over every item—Niki's statuette, Rupert's journal, Jack's lifeless, broken body, which *what the fuck*—but he doesn't look too hard. He knows every piece of evidence ever collected, and he knows that whatever Schlatt seeks isn't there. It's another mind game, he thinks, and he's still figuring out his response when he goes back when the door behind him swings open.

He turns, automatically, expecting to see Schlatt. Already, platitudes and apologies are on the tip of his tongue, but they die before they're even born.

Because it isn't Schlatt standing in the doorway.

"You can't be in here," he blurts out, eyes wide as he takes Wilbur in. The door shuts behind him, just as quietly as he opened it, and they're trapped in here together—consumed in a tense silence of their own making. Wilbur stares at him, eyes never once straying despite all the things hung up on the wall behind him. "Seriously," he tries again once he's regained some of his composure—silenced the restless noise and buzzing inside his head. "You're off this case. You can't be in here."

Wilbur sways slightly, and it's all the confirmation Tommy needs. He showed up to work drunk. *Again*. Bloodshot, red-rimmed eyes watch him as if he's the most important thing in the room—the world, maybe, or maybe that's just his own unstoppable ego showing up again. Wilbur leans his shoulder against the wall for whatever half-hearted support it can offer him. And when he speaks, it's with a slight slur. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Just for once in his short, artificial life, Tommy wishes the humans surrounding him would start making some goddamn sense. If they could stop being so enigmatic and spewing such cryptic, dramatic *bullshit*, he'd appreciate it greatly.

And yeah, sure, he's supposed to be this incredible fucking machine, this experimental prototype meant to save Cyberlife out bankruptcy and debt and responsibility, this—this *creature* built to read the slightest changes in the micro-expressions of others.

But for once, he'd appreciate it if life—or whatever cosmic forces existed, if any—would stop conspiring to make it all so *hard*.

"This is an open investigation that you are not a part of. Leave now, or I'll have to contact the captain."

Phil is an interesting case, he thinks. He's loyal to his job, but he's also loyal to his sons. Tommy is more than curious what Phil would choose, when it came down to it. Would he take his son's side or Tommy's? Or would he just stare at them both with that disapproving, pitying stare?

It's hard to say.

Wilbur doesn't leave—not that Tommy expected him to. He stands there, bloodshot eyes narrowed and darting across Tommy's face as if looking for something. Searching for some answer he can't find. "Why did you switch partners?" he asks again, a dull repeat of everything their conversation in an identical room was before.

Tommy finds it maddeningly frustrating.

The worst part is that he tried. In whatever fucked up way he could manage with Dream breathing down his neck and his entire system vibrating with the need to follow orders, to obey, to be useful, he tried to make this as quick and painless as possible. For whatever affection he could possibly have, he tried to make their necessary separation as easy as possible for both of them.

But time and time again, it's Wilbur that's been the old glue of this relationship. Sticky and molded and uncompromising, clinging to Tommy no matter how hard he pulls to get away. Leaving clumps and tacky strings of himself attached. Parts of himself that quickly incorporate into who Tommy is as a whole.

He tried, and yet everything—even their confrontation in a room over one—has led to this, it seems. And no matter how hard he tried to avoid this, he can see it. He can see their relationship fracturing, deep, lengthy cracks that he doesn't think can ever be fixed.

"What do you want me to say?" The silence stretches between them. Tommy doesn't know what shape his face must take, but it feels serious. Angry, if he can even manage that. Heat sears through his veins, and he loses himself in its mindlessness. "What are you possibly looking to get out of this interaction?"

And Wilbur just stares at him, looking patient but tired. "The truth."

"The truth, Wilbur?" He scoffs, turning his head so that he doesn't have to look Wilbur in the eyes. So he doesn't have to be privy to the emotions that flicker over his face—so ridiculously expressive, even when he doesn't want to be. Especially then. "You don't want the truth." Wilbur says nothing, and the silence itches under his skin. "I already told you the *truth*."

"You've told me something."

"And you...what? You don't believe it?" Something ugly rears in his gut, his throat, born from the compounded frustration of the past weeks. Of Schlatt's dismissal, and the odd stares, and his sheer uselessness. He sneers, and somehow, it feels both right and terrifyingly wrong on his face. "It certainly doesn't seem that way. Cornering me in the evidence locker to what? Whine about how you thought I cared? Question me again and again because you didn't like the answer you keep getting?"

"I'm questioning you again because I'm not sure I believe you," Wilbur says, and he sounds frighteningly certain. He's found his footing once again, and, despite the alcohol fumes radiating off him in a noxious cloud, he isn't ready to give up a second time. It's the detective in him, he thinks, or maybe it's this determination that makes him good at his job in the first place. "Because I am many things, *Tommy*—" for some reason, Tommy flinches. "—but what I'm not is *stupid*. Because I know how to read people, and more importantly, I know how to read *you*."

Despite the grind of his teeth, he forces himself to meet Wilbur's eyes. As expected, he doesn't like anything he finds there.

"You are a lot of things, too, but a machine?" Wilbur shakes his head, lips pulled into a scowl. "Uncaring?"

"You're wrong." And now he's the one feeling unsure, feet stumbling over roots and rocks he didn't know were there. His chest heaves at an inhumane speed, and yet he feels like he's choking. No warnings pop up in his vision.

"Oh, am I?" he takes a wobbly step forward, and Tommy, for all his molten resolve, takes a step back. "*Am I?* Because you say you don't care about me, and yet you've done nothing *but* since we met."

"I *don't* care about you!" he cries, frustration making his hand twitch with the urge to rip strands of artificial hair out of his head, if only to wave it in Wilbur's face and say, '*see?*' A clear sign of his manufacturing. Of his false humanity and his imitation body. "I *can't*. I'm a machine. I've always been just a machine." He's almost begging at this point. In a way, he thinks he probably is.

He needs, more than anything else in the whole world, for Wilbur to let him go. He needs to exit this room as whole as he can be anymore, to report back to Schlatt with empty hands and an unfaked neutrality and to satisfy Schlatt in whatever inane ways he requests.

He needs to be nothing more than the machine he was built to be.

Wilbur watches him. He looks with wide, too-knowing eyes—eyes that truly do know him, as he claimed before, that seek out all his tells and his weaknesses and his stupid, unfabricated vulnerabilities—and Tommy feels like he's shattering all over again, breath stuttering in his chest.

"I wish I could be what you want," he nearly sobs, red LED casting what must be a sickly, angry pallor across his face. "I wish I could be that person that you need, but I *can't*. I can't be what you want."

Wilbur swallows thickly. His eyes look glossy in the fluorescent light. "You don't know what I want."

And isn't that fucking lie if he's ever heard one.

Because for all that Wilbur knows Tommy, Tommy undoubtedly knows Wilbur. In all their time together, he's been watching and observing and picking out little pieces and storing them away like a squirrel. He knows Wilbur better than he knows himself. In all his short life, Wilbur is the only constant. The only thing he truly knows. "Don't I?"

Wilbur sucks in a sharp, stuttering breath, and Tommy watches it rattle around in his skeletal chest. He closes the few feet separating them, and, despite the tension and the burning anger and desperation still fueling him, Tommy holds perfectly still as he approaches. His rough palm smooths against Tommy's cheek, fitting against his skin as if it simply belongs. Like it's the easiest thing in the world. He swallows again, fingers curling and catching on the baby hairs at the side of his neck.

"I just want you to be you."

Tommy hiccups. His vision is blurry, cheeks wet with something that must be thirium because *androids can't cry*.

He knocks Wilbur away with flailing hands. "I don't exist! That android living with you for the past few months was fake. I'm programmed to adapt to any situation and you—" his

breath stutters, and he swallows around the lump clogging his throat. "You needed me to act a certain way." He takes a step back, hands finding a home on his elbows as he crosses his arms over his chest protectively.

He's never felt so small.

"That's all it was," he says in a whisper as all the anger and heat rushes out of him as his tears drip down his chin. "Acting. Shaping my personality to be your perfect partner." He lets the words linger in the air between them but he can't, in good conscience, force himself to look. In the silence, he tries to pull himself back together again.

"But I'm not your partner anymore. You don't pertain to my mission anymore and so—" he sucks in a breath sounds too loud—too *damning*—in the quiet. He forces himself to meet Wilbur's eyes. "This is goodbye, Lieutenant Soot," he says, just to cement the distance that desperately needs to separate them. "For real, this time."

He lingers, for just a single second, to drink in the last sight of Wilbur he can possibly allow himself to have.

And then, Tommy slips past him as silent as a ghost, slamming the door shut behind him.

December 24th, 2038

11:39 PM

The floor is cold and hard underneath him.

The more time he spends in it, the more he realizes just how poorly constructed the apartment is—something clearly built to pull in people with particular tastes but with a poor follow-through quality-wise. The carpet is thin, and Tommy can acutely feel the wood or concrete underneath. If it was possible, he's sure there would be bruises littering his arms from all the nights spent sprawled out on the floor, shoulder blades aching from holding his weight.

Tonight is no different from any other night, despite the special insistence humanity places on it, and his shoulder is already aching prematurely in anticipation of another fitful night. But Tommy had sat by, back pressed against the poorly molded walls, and watched as Schlatt ate his pathetic little dinner, watched clips of old football games and re-runs of sitcoms, and then slipped back to his room with a couple of beers held between wide-spread fingers.

And then Tommy was alone in an empty living room, listening to the drip of the leaky faucet two floors up for lack of anything better to do.

It isn't even like he cares about Christmas. He doesn't—*can't*—but there was something about it. Hallmark movies had built up some kind of heady anticipation in him, and Wilbur and his reluctantly excited family had only fueled it. And despite it all, Tommy found himself

waiting for the days to slip by, watching Wilbur count down the days until Christmas, and looking forward to seeing those beloved traditions for himself.

And now he's laying on Schlatt's floor in an empty apartment, devoid of life or Christmas decorations, save for the sad twiggy tree shoved in the corner. There aren't even any lights on it—just a crumpled tin foil star that can't even catch the overhead lights. Tommy's surprised Schlatt even put the thing up.

With all this time to himself—huddled up on the floor, the lights only on because Schlatt forgot to turn them off—he has no choice. His mind, driven by boredom and frustrated by the lack of movement, of *usefulness*, can only linger on so many topics before it returns to the unavoidable. And, despite the way it makes something ache in him worse than his cramped shoulder, he can't help but think of Wilbur.

He wonders if Wilbur and his family are celebrating tonight. It was supposed to be their first year back together, as a proper family, but he isn't blind to his influence over Wilbur—both the positives and the negatives that his so-called 'betrayal' had caused. He knows that the only reason that Wilbur had considered his family again—the only reason he pulled himself up long enough to consider stitching his family back together again—is because of Tommy.

It made him feel self-centered and egotistical to even think, and maybe it wasn't even true. Maybe Tommy needed to believe that he had some use in this fucked up world, and maybe Wilbur didn't even need him.

Maybe Tommy was only a catalyst—someone outside of Wilbur and his little bubble that had shown up and shown Wilbur that he could be loved. That his self-worth could be found outside of a bottle or his family's shattered expectations of him or work.

Maybe it was always meant to be, and Tommy's role in the whole thing was completely inconsequential, at best. Maybe Wilbur was always meant to pull himself together again, to pull his *family* together again. He was stronger than anyone could ever give him credit for. He was stronger than *Tommy* had given him credit for.

He would survive, no matter what. No matter what dark thoughts swirled around his head. Deep down, Wilbur would always survive.

Tommy shouldn't be able to feel comfort, but he still does. Just another item on his list of terrible impossibilities. Affection. Love. Comfort.

Despite its impossibility, Tommy can't help but allow whatever small pittance, small comfort, to wash over him. No matter what happens to him—artificial bones sawed down into dust, metal scraps rusted over with disuse, a single blue-stained bullet in his fucking skull—Wilbur would be alright.

In the corner of his vision, the displayed time turns over, and Christmas Eve becomes Christmas Day. And in the wake of the new holiday, Tommy allows himself one more moment of weakness; he leans back, head eventually landing against the wall with a thud, and he pictures whatever Christmas he might've had if he stayed. Christmas dinners, mashed potatoes, a coin in a cake.

Tommy squeezes his eyes shut against the impossible warmth that image inspires.

"Merry Christmas, Wil."

Chapter End Notes

Hey folks! Sorry for the delay. I had to get everything in order for my move (I was able to bring my cats with me, which I am so beyond pleased about), I had to move, and then I just completed the first week of this new semester. I don't have a job like I did last year, so I'm hoping to work on and finally finish this :) We still have a long ways to go, but I'm excited for everything still to come.

Thank you all for sticking with me (although it's still a few months off, it's almost been a year since I started this. I'm a little in awe of how much I've managed to accomplish) and for all the wonderful, wonderful comments. Y'all are the reason I do this <3

limbo

Chapter Summary

Tommy has a really bad, terrible time.

Chapter Notes

TW: Not terribly graphic descriptions of physical abuse, but like? There are still descriptions and mentions of it

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Chapter Thirty-Four: Limbo

It doesn't just stop there, with one drunken incident hanging in the air between them. With one dent in his unbruisable body, located on his hip in the place where it cracked against the countertop. Of course it doesn't just stop there because that was, if anything, just an inciting incident. A break in the seal that allowed the flood gates to burst open, or so to speak.

Despite Schlatt's—well, calling it an apology isn't quite right, because he never *apologized*, despite his obvious discomfort—remorse over the incident, his sticky feelings do nothing to prevent it from happening again.

Time passes, and Tommy stops measuring the days by the traditional, Gregorian calendar and instead by Schlatt's moods. On the good days, he allows Tommy to be of more help—organizing evidence, and accompanying him to the actual crime scene instead of staying in the car, and sometimes, on the best of days, asking for his sparse input. On the good days, Tommy lingers before seeking out his nest, watching over Schlatt as he hums and laughs, as he heats up food, as he watches Jeopardy.

He begins to be able to tell, just by the rise of the sun, of the vibrating particles in the air, what kind of day it will be. He knows because Schlatt's mood is fickle and built of so many factors combined—how much sleep he got, how hungover he is, if he ate a healthy meal or a shitty one, if his team lost, if if if, there are too many to count.

Bad days always start with his violent awakening via the vibrating of the floors, of Schlatt's feet landing too harsh and too loud as he makes his way to the bathroom. Bad days spell

disaster by the evening, and Tommy always begins the countdown, measuring how bad Schlatt's outburst will be by the way he sips his coffee.

The second time it ever happened, Schlatt was drunk again. He wasn't quite angry—not like he was before, fueled by Wilbur's disdain and his own burning hatred for himself—but he *was* frustrated. It had been a long, useless day at work, and Tommy had spotted the tension in his muscles and the pinch to his expression from a mile away. As early as it had been, he had yet to put together what those meant—the doom it spelled for him.

Schlatt had started drinking before the door even slammed shut behind him, and that was the real tell. The only one that Tommy had caught onto. By well into the evening, his filters were worn down, as well as all his false niceties. That time, he had only been a slap on the wrist—quite literally—and although it had stung in the moment, along with his confusion, it was forgotten come morning.

And so the cycle went on.

It had started so small, and only in such specific conditions, that Tommy had failed to see how it would grow. How a man such as Schlatt, who craved power and control in all things, wouldn't pass up opportunities to exert it when they came so frequently. When they came paired with a ready-made excuse—*"Oh shit, I had way too much to drink last night."*—and a victim who was all too-willing to excuse his behavior.

The first time one of his outbursts occurred without the aid of alcohol to impair his decision-making skills—earlier in the day, too, only ten minutes after they got home—Tommy had squished himself into a corner and gone over nearly every interaction they've had. He noted his behavior and the things that triggered Schlatt, and he resolved himself, no matter how shaky his hands were, that he would do better.

Because he was Cyberlife's greatest creation, and yet, somehow, he was still failing.

The very sight of amber-hued bottles had taken on a certain connotation, and yet Tommy is still scared without their presence. Even on good days, Schlatt suffers from wild mood swings. Even when the weather is bright and warmer, and when Tommy is useful and quiet all day, even then, his mood is still subject to change.

Tommy begins to understand that nothing is sacred. Nothing is concrete. Not even his carefully crafted calendar. And he begins to fear every single day instead of only the ones where tension cramps Schlatt's muscles.

It happens, and it happens again. It happens with surprising frequency and with a rapidly growing brutality. It happens, and it keeps happening, until it gets so bad that Tommy feels the need to bring it up in one of his and Dream's rare meetings.

It's still early enough in that odd, liminal space for it to be lit up with pale, cloudy light. The winter has receded, if only a little bit, and the ice that had recently taken over the pond surrounding the house has thawed out. It leaves the water freezing cold and with chunks of ice floating, aimlessly, but with no top sheen for him to stand on.

A bummer, really. Tommy was kind of looking forward to it.

Dream lingers outside when Tommy finally finds him, head tipped back to look out at a forest of bare trees, snow melting against the finer branches and running down the bark. No breath betrays his commitment to stillness, and no cloudy fog confirms his life, either. His mask obscures his face, and the winter light glints off it.

Tommy steps up next to him, silent and with his hands tucked behind his back.

Things between them have been off since their last confrontation, and their meetings are few and far between. When they do meet, Dream is cold and distant, and Tommy has little desire to bridge the gap that yawns between them.

He still thinks it was completely unnecessary to switch partners, if only because Schlatt is a dangerous unknown, and he's only becoming more dangerous by the second. Tommy can feel the darkness that strains beneath the thin veneer of friendliness he still insists upon in their softer moments. Discontentment grows beneath the surface with every breath. With every interaction that Wilbur goes unprovoked.

Schlatt, at his core, is a man that wants many things but has received very few of them. He wants, and he wants unreciprocated, and his frustration grows and doubles, moving beneath his skin like an insidious snake. He is a ticking time bomb waiting to go off.

Dream no longer asks him how things are going. That isn't the purpose of any of their meetings, anymore, although Tommy often wonders what their purpose is. To keep him in line?

Unnecessary, but—he reluctantly supposes—not unwarranted, given the circumstances.

When Dream continues this odd tirade of silence, Tommy shifts from foot to foot. The dock is wet beneath his shoes with a mixture of the pond that forever laps at its edges and the recently melted snow. "Schlatt is becoming increasingly violent," he says slowly, with all the cadence of someone speaking about the weather. "The marks he leaves are growing in frequency and severity. If left unchecked, he'll damage me beyond function."

Dream hums, although it reveals nothing. It could be in interest, in discontentment, in frustration. It could be noise for noise's sake—an answer to Tommy's wordless question.

He doesn't know, and he hates not knowing. Dream is always so hard to read, and Tommy, not for the first time, finds himself reeling in his emotionless void.

"Schlatt is smart enough to avoid that. He's unreasonably angry, yes, and takes that anger out on you, but he isn't an idiot. He knows what will become of him if he interferes with this investigation in any way."

He's already interfering, he wants to scream. Beyond even damaging Tommy, he's commandeering the investigation in a way that leaves them with less information. He's driving them into the ground with useless work, and he doesn't even work to understand the deviants. Not like Wilbur did.

Tommy bites back his more raw feelings, tucking them back into himself with a shaky breath. "That would be true, but he's also drunk more often than not. And drunk people are known to lose their faculties and make poor decisions." He thinks, briefly, of what would happen if Schlatt were to truly lose himself. If his fists never stopped until Tommy's unbruisable face was dented beyond recognition. "I just—we don't need anything slowing the investigation down," he says, a tad too quick and with a touch of breathlessness.

"No, we don't," he agrees with a dip of his head. "But it's fine, Tommy."

"And I know it doesn't really matter, because I'm an android—" he feels like he's slipping. The carefully constructed voice he uses to speak with Dream is falling through the gaps in him, and he fumbles as he tries to find it once again. "—obviously, but he is slowing down the investigation. He's been slowing it down for days now, and this? This is just the cherry on top. I refuse to fail, and yet he is making it much harder to do so."

"It's fine, Tommy," Dream says again, the perfect epitome of calm even in the face of his word vomit. Tommy opens his mouth to refute, to bring up some non-existent evidence that will miraculously change the tide of conversation, but he's cut off before he even can begin. "Besides, I think this is a fitting punishment."

Tommy stops, metaphoric gears in his brain halting with a screech. "What?"

Dream turns him then, and despite the mask hiding his face, despite the fact that nothing in his demeanor has changed, Tommy gets the feeling that he's dripping with condescension. "This is a fitting punishment for your disobedience."

"My earlier disobedience?" His breath comes quicker in his chest at the turn in the conversation. Dream is not Schlatt, but he's not Wilbur, either. "I haven't disobeyed you."

"Not directly, no." Again, he dips his head. "But it never should have taken my interference for you to switch partners. You knew Wilbur was ineffective, and yet you let yourself be blinded to the necessary actions. You have sat by and wasted precious seconds playing house with your detective while the deviant leader gallivanted around. While deviancy spread."

"No, I—"

"A machine doesn't trade efficiency for feelings, Tommy." Tommy averts his eyes at last, choosing instead to stare at the branches as they wave in the wind. At the lapping of the icy water. "Schlatt is a fitting punishment for you, I think. A reminder not to let yourself make the same mistakes again. You are so close to failure." He steps forward, fingers grabbing Tommy's chin and wrenching his head to look at him again. "One more slip up and you'll be declared completely useless."

Despite the liquid fear coursing through his veins, Tommy tries to steel himself and whatever emotion breaks through his desperate mask of indifference.

Dream assesses him. Then, with another pat on his cheek, he lets his head drop. "Don't disappoint me, Tommy," he says. With a blink of an eye, he's back in his makeshift bed, fingers forming a fist in Wilbur's stolen hoodie.

He sucks in a shuddering breath and resolves to do better.

January 6th, 2038

12:07 PM

When Tommy enters the break room, he's not alone.

All this time, he'd been so focused on avoiding all the obvious candidates—Wilbur, for the torn history between them; Quackity, for the look in the eyes that follow him everywhere—that he had forgotten about a third, just as unpleasant potential.

But in his defense, he thought an interaction with him would be unlikely to occur. They both distrusted each other an equal amount, and no matter whatever peace offerings had occurred on a porch in the middle of a snowy night, it doesn't stop Tommy from tensing when he spots Techno.

The first thing that occurs to him is how *planned* the entire encounter feels.

Techno is tucked away in the corner, in a spot where he is unlikely to be seen unless the other person is already fully in the break room. Where they can't back out without making it plain to both parties that it's a retreat. Everything else about it is so purposeful—the way Techno is lounging with false relaxation against the counter, mug in hand, elbow draped over the countertop. The way he didn't even look up when Tommy entered because he was already looking, eyes watching Tommy's every move as he so willingly entered the trap laid out.

And despite the information slotting into place—this interaction most certainly was planned, although to what end remains unclear—Tommy doesn't allow himself to still for long. It's still noticeable, unfortunately, but he jolts into action quickly, recovering easily enough as he makes a beeline for the rows of mugs hidden away behind shoddy cupboard doors.

The motions are unbearably familiar to him, something done with the ease of a monotonous routine. He falls into the motions easily, although the burn of Techno's gaze on him makes his mind wander. He lets himself drift, trusting his body to remember the steps while he contemplates Techno's position.

What could they possibly have to say to each other? What civil conversation could the two of them possibly have?

Techno doesn't say anything. He sips tea from a chipped mug, two rough hands wrapped around the ceramic to savor its heat, and he watches Tommy's stiff shoulders as he moves about the kitchen. The tension in the room only grows the longer it remains silent, save for the occasional, intentional—and seemingly pointed—slurps.

Tommy's mind whirs and spins, considering sharp, pointed words that must be tucked away in Techno's head. Surely, he must be pissed off at him for what he did to Wilbur. He never liked Tommy; his eyes were always seeking him out, waiting for him to slip up. This must be the cherry on top of it all.

And yet, he's not bragging. Or, at the very least, he's postponing the bragging for something. For Tommy to break, maybe?

Part of him wants to shut his mouth with a click of his teeth and never open it again, just out of spite. He's done this before—he's played this waiting game, and he's won. He could easily do it, if he so desired, but the passing days of fear and tension have left him tired and frustrated. And the silence gets to him much quicker than it should.

"What?" he says, raising his chin to meet Techno's awaiting gaze.

And yet, there is no flicker of acknowledgement over his face. No damning emotional tell—the irritation, the anger, the need for justice. Nothing flickers over his face. The only response he gets is a slight raise of a single eyebrow.

"What?" Techno parrots back, his tone that frustrating monotone. Clearly, he isn't interested in playing this game. Or, at the very least, he wants to play a different kind of game; one with no clear rules, with no clear victory or loss. One where the ground beneath their very feet is crumbling, making their movements shaky and uneasy.

Tommy doesn't deign him with an answer. He turns back to the coffee maker and busies himself while it finishes brewing.

There's something brewing in him as well. It's too desperate to call it curiosity, and several times he finds himself biting his lip to avoid blurting out the question on his mind.

He hasn't seen much of Wilbur since their final confrontation. Coming back after Christmas, Wilbur had stuck to himself; he had kept his head ducked, hiding perpetually blood-shot eyes, and had avoided Tommy as studiously as he was avoiding Wilbur.

It should be a relief, but it isn't. The gaping maw inside of his chest only grows with their separation. Tommy finds himself lingering in shared spaces more often in the pale hopes that he might catch even the faintest glimpse of Wilbur.

It wouldn't fill his ache to ask, though, and so Tommy goes to leave as soon as he has a steaming mug in his hand. Techno's eyes follow him as he crosses the room and linger on him still even when he stops in the center of the archway. He presses his lips together against the growing need, and even then, it slips out, as if ripped from his very soul. "How... is he doing?"

The silence doesn't feel surprised. It doesn't feel angry or tense or—or disgusted, or like any emotion in particular. Tommy doesn't feel brave enough to sneak a glance, so he instead focuses on the fingers of his free hand as they brush against the ceramic. Techno shifts and the creak of the counter underneath him is deafening.

"Why do you care?" he asks in a neutral deadpan. "You're not his partner anymore. You've made that perfectly clear."

Part of Tommy wonders just how much Wilbur had told his family. Another part of him shies away from the imagery. "I'm not," he agrees easily, mind whirring as he tries to figure out how to get the answer without revealing too much of himself. It's a dangerous, unsteady dance. "But I'm programmed to care about and prevent the loss of human life."

When he finally chances a glance, Techno is wearing a deadpan, disbelieving look. He doesn't believe Tommy's bullshit for a single second, which is, admittedly, fair considering just how baseless the lie was. "Try again."

Tommy blows out a frustrated breath and turns away from the doorway. For better or worse, he's in this conversation now. "Okay, fine. I—" he hesitates, wavers on the delicate precipice between lie and truth. "Phil asked me to take care of him while we were partners. I hate to think that I failed."

It's not a lie exactly. Phil *did* ask him to take care of Wilbur, and the thought of failure sat like a burning stone in his gut. But the implication that he took Phil up on his offer? That the only reason he took care of Wilbur was because Phil asked him to?

That was preposterous. Caring for Wilbur was the most natural thing in the world.

Techno still stares at him, and Tommy finds himself antsy for the answer.

"Look," he breathes when it becomes clear that his answer hasn't won him anything. "I just—I... *want* him to be happy and healthy and—and *safe*. As his brother, I thought you might want that as well." The word *want* burns on his tongue—an inexplicably sour taste in his mouth that has it screwing up involuntarily. That word is the embodiment of everything he isn't meant to be.

But it does the trick.

Something in Techno's face softens at the decidedly human wording, although his hand twitches slightly and briefly—visible for only five milliseconds, most likely in response to the barb about their rocky brotherhood. "Why do you care?" he asks again. "By your own choice, you're not his partner anymore." He crosses his arms over his chest. It comes across as a defensive move, one meant to make himself look bigger. More intimidating.

As he still has donut crumbs on the corner of his mouth, it doesn't exactly work.

"It was for the best," Tommy recites in a dull, robotic monotone. "Our work on the case was slowing down to an unacceptable pace. And Wil—Lieutenant Soot was growing sympathetic to the deviants'. It's understandable considering how human they look and act, but ultimately inefficient." He pauses, glancing over his shoulder and out into the bullpen, where he can see Wilbur grumpily pouring a sugar packet into his coffee cup. His lips twitch. "The only rational choice was to ask for a different partner. One more focused on work."

Techno hums thoughtfully, leaning back until the counter digs into his lower spine. Relaxed, or at least projecting a relaxed stance to... what? Put him at ease? Make him more tense? "You say that, and yet, by your own admission, you want Wil to be happy." He fixes Tommy with a searching look. "One could reasonably say that you care about him."

Tommy traces a grout line on the floor. It's dirty, clogged with swept dirt. "I'm a machine. I'm incapable of experiencing emotions," he says dutifully, resorting back to his default now that it's clear that even faux emotions won't get him anywhere with Techno.

"But if you care about him—" Techno muses almost to himself, as if Tommy hadn't even spoken. "—then why did you choose to be reassigned?"

It feels like someone poured boiling water straight from the kettle into his thirium pump. It's a familiar feeling by now, but no less effective at making his fists clench, his teeth grit. It's the heat of watching the officers manhandle Niki, the heat of watching the deviant escape while one hand gripped Wilbur's forearm, the heat of Dream's scathing words about Wilbur's uselessness.

He breathes through the feeling as it spreads from his chest to the rest of his body. His perfectly-shaped, artificial nails dig into his smooth artificial skin, spilling artificial blood. Warnings fill his screen.

"I don't know if it somehow escaped your notice," he says with a halting, deadly calm he doesn't feel. "But I... am a fucking *machine*. I am plastic and wires and blue fluid filling my veins. I am a poor mockery made in a human image." Blue slicks his palms from shallow cuts that are constantly healing and being reopened, but Tommy doesn't pay it any mind. "I don't fucking have *emotions*, I'm not fucking capable of caring about things, and I *certainly* don't have agency over my fate.

"I am nothing but a *machine*," he breathes, heat and warnings clouding his vision. "A creation built to obey orders. And that's what I do. I'm so *pleased* that my performance was convincing enough for even *you* to forget that—" Techno makes an unhappy noise, although Tommy is in no state to analyze its meaning. "—but know now that I have no autonomy."

It's only then that he realizes how fast his chest heaves. Warnings in his vision speak of his increased temperature, although he doesn't need them for that. He can feel the heat of his body through his old suit, in the pulsing of his wounds as they close when he finally uncurls his hands. He takes a moment of silence to reset himself—to gather up the frayed edges of his nonchalance, to wipe the blue away on his dark slacks, to let his chest slow.

"This talk was unproductive," he says finally, ice in his tone meant to counteract the sudden heat that still lingers in his veins. "If you'll excuse me, I have work to do." It's a lie, but Techno doesn't need to know that. Without waiting for a response, Tommy turns on his heel and walks through the archway.

"Tommy," Techno calls out.

It's the only time Tommy can ever remember Techno using his name, and it stops him with ridiculous ease. He teeters in the doorway, eyes squeezed closed. "What?"

"If the decision was up to you—and I mean, truly up to you, with no one to influence it one way or another—what would you have chosen?"

He should just walk away. He shouldn't even dignify that ridiculous question with an answer. Hypotheticals and What-Ifs are for humans to ponder, never androids.

Nevertheless, he stays rooted to the spot.

By all accounts—by Dream's own word—he shouldn't have needed a push in the right direction. Wilbur's performance was severely lacking, and he was taking Tommy's productivity down with him. If he had defied Dream's orders—making him no better than the deviants he hunts—they would've dropped the case eventually. He would've been made useless—an android without a purpose—and disassembled.

And yet, as he stares down at his palms—the creases of his artificial skin stained blue from thirium that won't leave—he can't help but think of Wilbur's hand brushing through his hair, or the melodic strum of his out-of-tune guitar.

When he tries to answer, the words get caught in his throat. So instead, he breathes out slowly, whistling through his teeth, and gives an awkward, jerky shrug. In the end, it doesn't matter. Techno has already come to whatever conclusions he'll come to, and no answer from Tommy will change his mind.

So, he says, "I'm sure you already know the answer," and leaves without a second glance.

He's sure anyone who knows even a fraction of what their relationship entailed knows the answer as well. Sometimes, even he can be so painfully transparent.

January 8th, 2038

5:56 PM

They get the call when they're almost back to Schlatt's apartment.

It had been a sluggish day full of little work—as all the days were becoming to be like; grey and boring and blurring together even in his remarkable mind—and Tommy had been so ready for hours of laying on the ground, avoiding whatever wrath Schlatt stumbled upon for the night. Going back to private quarters was always a gamble nowadays—even when Tommy is quiet and unobtrusive, Schlatt still finds ways to make it his problem—but he was still looking forward to the solitude.

Despite all the introspection he's cursed with during the mundane days, he finds himself at least looking forward to the mindless sleep. He's been seeing more of that red wall in his dreams, although every time he sees it, it's with more of those thin, hairline fractures in it. Deep down, he feels he must know the implications of that, but, as Dream said, he's become remarkably good at avoiding anything he doesn't want to think about.

That, paired with the buzzing in his system, creates the perfect storm for avoidance.

The call itself is unremarkable in the tone—a rookie cop, too tired to understand the implications of the news he delivers—and yet so important in its content. Even Schlatt, as annoyed as he is at being called when they're technically off-duty, turns the car around without a single word.

The roads are crowded due to the hour, and to make matters worse, they get bogged down at every light. It seems hard to believe—the streets are as busy as ever, but not busier; all the other people in their cars don't seem worried—but in another part of the city, androids are marching through the streets.

Instantly alert and yet with nowhere to put that newfound energy, Tommy flicks through his connection to the internet, searching channels until he finds one reporting on the situation.

In the shaky news feed, helicopters circle overhead like sharks. Their poor-quality cameras barely manage to capture the sight of a few dozen androids—a tentative number, growing by the second as more androids join from the sidelines, leaving shocked owners behind and children's hands empty—making their way down brick streets.

The shots are from too far away to get a clear view, but, from in between narrow buildings, Tommy swears he can see Tubbo heading the charge.

Without a word, Schlatt plucks one of those tiny siren lights for detectives from the dashboard. They're caught in a stand-still, two long lines of stagnant cars boxing them in, and it seems he got tired of waiting. Leaning out his unrolled window, he slaps it on the hood. Cold, bitter wind seeps in through the closing window, bringing with it the shrieking sound of their siren.

It, unfortunately, doesn't un-crowd the streets. And even though the citizens have done their best to begrudgingly pull their cars over to the side of the road, it's slow and painful work.

It only gets more crowded the further they get into the heart of the city.

Pedestrians stream on sidewalks and across narrow crosswalks, and Schlatt's mood can only plummet further. He dodges people and parked cars, and he weaves through narrow, one-way streets, cursing even as Tommy guides him through the city with a map pulled up in his periphery. On the other side of his vision, he's watching the androids' numbers grow steadily.

Eventually, the deviants congregate in a wide, empty plaza. "We need them alive," he mutters to himself as dark vans skid to a stop on the edges of the plaza, armed forces spilling out of the barely still vans to surround the deviants.

Thankfully, he's ignored by Schlatt, whose hands are white-knuckling the steering wheel.

It's only once they reach the outskirts of the plaza—still a bit away due to the sheer amount of pedestrians and news vans, like a thick uncrossable river—that he spots him.

The deviants are still in the face of the armed forces' sizeable guns, although there seems to be some uncertainty over what to do. Some of them have their hands raised in surrender while others have them at their sides, a clear defiance. Further yet, some have gone completely still like a bunny about to die of fright.

And yet, a wave goes through the crowd, and from the center, making his way to the front, is Tubbo.

He looks worse off than when Tommy last saw him—actually saw him; hallucinations or recreations don't count. His skin is paler, and the warping of his abnormality seems larger than it had been before. As if there's less thirium fueling his system. He's wearing a dirty coat not unlike Wilbur's, and there are smudges of blue and brown scattered across his skin.

But his eyes are determined, as is the tense set of his jaw.

Tubbo steps forward—the crowd easily parting for him, just as the sea did for Moses—and he stands in front of his collected deviants, almost protectively. He stands in front of him, arms spread out like great, protective wings, despite the fact that he cannot possibly hope to save them all. There are too many guns with too many bullets, and he is just one man.

It's admiral, though. How easily he steps in front of a dozen guns trained on him without a second thought. How easily he decides to defend his people, even when he is the head of the movement.

Tommy's breath catches in his chest, and he's out of the vehicle before it even rolls to a complete stop. He's so close, just hundreds of feet separating them. He could reach Tubbo in a matter of minutes.

"Disperse," one of the men in the assorted conglomerate of black clothes yells out. It echoes throughout the city even with the helicopters that pass overhead. Even with their deafening and aching familiar noise.

Tubbo says nothing for a long time. His eyes scan the soldiers in front of him, taking the time to linger on each and every individual. Then, he frowns. "The right to peaceful protest is protected under the first amendment. This is unconstitutional."

He's right but obtusely ignoring the fact that the constitution doesn't apply to androids.

Tommy ducks and waves through a stupefied crowd of humans, and his feet pound against the wet pavement as he runs. Despite his system remaining fully functional, it's like he has tunnel vision.

Nothing but Tubbo matters. Not the humans with their guns. Not the crowd of angry and fearful deviants—prone to lashing out, his system reminds him—gathered behind Tubbo, grimly ready to jump to his defense. And especially not Schlatt at his back with his unanswered demands.

It's a recipe for disaster—a storm brewing a thick, impenetrable tension. And yet, none of that matters.

Because Tubbo is right there.

With a wave of his hand, he easily calms the growing dissent behind him without even taking his eyes off the soldiers. "We come in peace," he tries, nothing as pedestrian as displeasure leaking into his expression, although Tommy is sure he must be frustrated. "We have harmed no one, we have done no damage. Please, allow us the rest of our protest."

In response, the raucous sound of a dozen guns clicking simultaneously fills the silent space.

Tommy's breath is ragged in his ear, and his heart pounds quicker at the noise. He can't let them kill Tubbo. He, more than any other deviant, needs to be kept alive.

Tubbo steps forward again, steel determination in his eyes. He *will* protect the other deviants, even if it takes his entire body.

Skidding to a stop on the concrete, Tommy surveys the too-tall fence standing between him and his prize. Although it isn't too much trouble—Tommy has climbed a number of fences before; he can do it again—he still finds himself stilling, the tip of his shoe wedged into one of the narrow chain links. At the quiet noise of the rattling fence, Tubbo glances over.

And their eyes meet.

Tommy doesn't know what he finds here. Recognition, maybe, although this is their first official meeting. Confusion, then? Or curiosity. A hundred nameless emotions, a hundred possibilities.

But, for a single second, he swears Tubbo's mouth lifts in the barest hint of acknowledgement. In a mischief that manages to shine through the sheer exhaustion.

And then the sound of guns firing cracks the air, and Tubbo drops like a sack of potatoes, blue blooming on his shirt from the bullet holes in his gut.

Tommy's breath stutters in his throat, and, just like that, he's pulled from his reverie.

His fingers wrap around the steel, and he hauls himself up the fence. As always, with every fence he's ever climbed, the metal bites into his fingers. Such a thin wire bearing his entire weight, along with the help of the tips of his shoes—squeezed by the tiny gap they've been forced to fit into—puts heavy pressure on his fingers.

He keeps moving though, gaze locked on the fence as he climbs instead of on the scene unfolding on the other side. He can still hear it, though, and his ears are tuned into the gunfire echoing throughout the air. Outraged and anguished shouts of the deviants join it, and the roar of the helicopters as they soar overhead, upturning a breeze so vicious it feels like his clothes will rip right off his very body.

He keeps climbing, though, only pausing at the very top to survey the scene before him.

Tubbo is gone, although there's a small stain of blue in the snow where he collapsed. The deviants are swarming; some of them are covering the exit of others into a nearby manhole

cover like sewer rats, grimaces on their faces as they prolong the inevitable death of their comrades by chumming the water with their own blood.

It's noble, if not utterly inconsequential.

Tommy doesn't see how they can escape, even with the distraction of the maze of sewers beneath the city. They'll ultimately be found out.

It's still noble, though. To die for a believed-in cause. Noble and sad, he thinks as he spots a few androids lying face down in the snow, blue blood staining the ground beneath them. He wonders if their down-turned faces will even be remembered. He wonders how many of them deviated today; birth to death in one fell swoop.

How could Tubbo possibly condone that?

Tommy hesitates at the top. The armed forces don't seem too concerned with the rats that slip away into the sewers, or maybe they just don't want to dirty or undignify themselves by following after. That should be his job; to do what the humans don't want to. To be everything that the humans can't be.

He hesitates at the top of the world, though, watching the still twitching bodies of androids and letting his eyes linger on Tubbo's bloody stain. It's impossible to know how many bullets hit him, although the stain on the ground isn't large. As long as they have access to supplies, he can't imagine this will be his undoing.

Tubbo won't die tonight. He can't, not by any hand other than Cyberlife's skilled technicians.

After a harsh, annoyed bark from Schlatt, Tommy climbs down the fence. There are thin lines of grease pressed into his skin from the fence, and his hands are frozen over from the prolonged exposure to the air and to the freezing metal. He doesn't put into his pockets, though, even as he ducks his head to climb inside the car.

The rest of the ride back—which takes longer than the ride here—is spent in silence. Tommy can feel Schlatt's anger as if it's a physical thing, but he also can't bring himself to care. He's well and truly tired, and the only action that seems manageable right now is to press his temple up against the cold glass and watch the other people in their cars. It'll be hell, once they're behind the so-called safety of locked doors, but for now, they're in limbo, and it doesn't seem such a bad place to be.

And yet, Schlatt's frustration continues to build, and, just as Tommy predicted it would, the impending crest of his anger breaks once the door shuts behind them.

It's one of his biggest fits in a while; Schlatt angrily rants to the air and to Tommy's despondent, tense body about anything and everything. He curses the traffic and the idiots behind the wheels. He curses deviants and Cyberlife, and the news vans clogging their path and the pedestrians that had no right to be there. He spews and spits vitriol about helicopters, of all things, and, when he runs out of things to complain about, he returns—as always—to Wilbur.

At this point, Tommy's just impressed that he can still find things to complain about.

"What a waste of life," he spits, eyes glazed over not with drink but with blind anger. "A drunken embarrassment. It's no wonder his wife left him." Tommy twitches with the knee-jerk reaction to defend him, teeth sinking into his tongue to stop the urge. He's an android; pointed words against his old partner mean nothing to him.

But then Schlatt says something truly unforgiveable. And Tommy's mechanical body fills with heat so hot, it scorches his brain and overrides any critical thinking skills.

Schlatt scowls, eyes lost somewhere on the ceiling, and says, "It's no wonder his son is *dead*."

And Tommy decides '*fuck it*'.

"Just because you've found a way to function with your addiction doesn't give you the right to shit on him for failing to do the same," he says, voice fire and poison and wrath. "Besides, Wilbur at least has a reason for his addiction. What's your excuse?"

The words ring out in the silence between them. Tommy knows he's made a mistake, just by the way Schlatt's antsy pacing stops. By how still he goes, eyes narrowing on his face.

He knows he's made a mistake, because he knew he would be when he opened his mouth. And he still made it anyway, knowing the potential consequences.

He thinks that might be love, although what does he know? He's just an android.

As expected, it's the worst beating yet. Tommy can do nothing other than curl up on the ground, arms bracketing his face as if that could ever protect him from Schlatt's fists and feet. His boots seem magnetized to the same spot, right in between his ribs, and he kicks so much Tommy fears he'll break.

It stops eventually, when the floor is coated in thirium from his split skin, and when his body shivers from the aftershocks and his own repressed sobs. It stops eventually, and Schlatt leaves like nothing ever happened. Like his boots aren't covered in still-wet thirium that, in a couple hours, only Tommy will be able to see.

The apartment quiets as soon as the door slams shut, and Tommy uncurls a little, just enough to survey the splatters of vivid blue across his skin. It soaks and stains and bathes him, and Tommy curls up again before he can see too much. He lays there, hair damp with blood and mind buzzing with the aftershocks. With the sting and ache of his entire body.

And only when the light underneath Schlatt's door shuts off does he allow himself one moment of weakness.

He pushes his slick forehead against the floor, and he sobs.

He hates it here. He hates it *so much*. He hates Schlatt. He hates Dream for making him come here. He hates Cyberlife for making him. He hates Phil for not seeing through his bullshit, and he hates Techno for not convincing him to go back. He hates, and he hates, and he hates.

He wants to be back at Wilbur's. He wants to be with Wilbur.

He wants to go *home*.

January 9th, 2038

11:34 AM

Work, although hell on his mind and his body—both still sore, from the phantom bruises in his bones to his tired system, sluggish from the lack of thirium in his body—is a welcome reprieve. Schlatt balances out once again, becoming the familiar, subdued persona that he always is in public. It's a welcome return to familiarity, and Tommy gladly ferries around the office like a good little assistant.

At some point, vision blurring and crowding with the warnings that he can't dismiss, he takes a small detour into one of the supply closets to snag a bag of thirium. Although he knows, logically, there are a few bags of thirium in Schlatt's apartment, he doesn't know where they are, and he doesn't want to risk any ire that might come from his search.

He tucks the bag into his pocket, and, when he gets another chance, he stops by Niki's cell.

It's been a long time since any officers have been stationed outside of her cell, and so it's easy to unlock it, jerking his head toward the interrogation rooms. Niki follows behind him, head ducked as they walk along the outskirts of the room.

They take their seats quickly and quietly. Tommy doesn't have much to say; he didn't have a reason for pulling her from the cell other than for a break from the noise of the office, which had started grating on his overstimulated nerves. She watches him as he pulls out the bag from his pocket. "I don't need that," she says with a kind of upturn to her voice that makes it almost a question.

"No, but I do." Without further preamble, he twists the cap off of it and downs it in one gulp, squeezing the empty pouch once he's done to get every last drop. The taste is familiar and metallic on his tongue, and he licks the remainder off his lips. Slowly, most of the warnings disappear from his vision, and the ones that don't are easily dismissed. "Perfect."

He can feel some of the tension easing out of him, and he slumps back in his chair, metal edge digging into his spine. Niki's eyes burn holes in his skin, but he revels in the little silence before she gains her nerve. "Why were you so low on thirium?"

"Tubbo led a protest yesterday," he says, as if that explains *anything*. And, according to Niki's hum, it does. "Schlatt and I went to investigate. It was chaos."

"Did... what happened to the other deviants?"

They're walking a fine line, but, in Tommy's tired state—one bag of thirium doesn't solve all his problems; it just restores his system enough for him to be able to *think*—he doesn't care to mind it. "Some escaped, some didn't," he says with less care than he usually has. "Tubbo got shot, but he made it out, too."

They sit in silence for a while before he feels the tips of Niki's fingers brush against his eyes. He opens his eyes, brow furrowing. She's reaching out across the gap, eyes lingering on his face as carefully wraps her bare hand around his wrist. Without thinking about it, he lets his skin peel away.

Like before, a rush of information overtakes him. He can feel Niki's emotions—concern, sadness, a small, deep pit of growing resentment—settling over him. Instead of pulling away like had before, he allows the connection, leaning into the contact and simply ignoring the feelings that brush up against him. Her fingers trail along the offered skin, tracing the little scratches and marks in his chassis. "What happened here?" she asks quietly, fingertips touching the edge of the new plastic that covered up his stab wound.

"A deviant stabbed me," he says, honest. It causes her frown to deepen a little, but he sees no reason to lie to her.

"And here?" Her hands travel up, rolling up his sleeve until he can see deep scratches in his forearm.

"Stella," he tells her.

"Here?" Her thumb brushes along an ugly, round, puckered scar in his wrist. Tommy hesitates.

This one is new. Despite all of Schlatt's maltreatment, permanent marks are much rarer than you'd think. He has the dent in his hip, a few light scratches along his jaw from when Schlatt chucked a beer bottle at him—it had missed, although the rebounding glass shards managed to lodge in his face—and the one that Niki is squinting at, realization blooming across her face.

"It's from an accident," he says quickly, in a pitiful attempt to get ahead of it. "I was cleaning up, and I didn't notice that one of the cigarette butts was still hot."

Her breath is sharp and shaky. "An accident? Tommy—" Tommy pulls his hand away as she goes to brush her thumb over it again. He'd been so fucking stupid to allow her exploration, especially when he knew that identical scars littered her own arms. He'd been stupid to think that lie would work, too, but desperation still clogs his throat. Her sharp eyes find his, narrowed and suddenly so, so angry. "Did Schlatt do this?"

"No," he lies, settling his hands on his lap. Niki's hands aren't warm, and yet, his own feel cold without hers. "Niki, it's nothing."

"It's a cigarette burn. You have a cigarette burn on your wrist, and I *know* Wilbur didn't do that."

"Yeah, well how do you know that it wasn't some stranger off the street?" His teeth grind together, and the sound is deafening in his own ears. "Plenty of people hate androids! And it's not like anyone would've stopped them!"

"So you admit that someone burned you?" she points at him, triumphant in his eyes.

"No, I—"

The door behind him opens with a creak, and Tommy's jaw shuts with a clack of his teeth.

The so-called android revolution had a few interesting effects on humanity, one of which is the increased wariness around androids. People are worried that the machines will go off without a single warning, and so, there are very few people in the office who would willingly walk in on a conversation between two androids.

"Schlatt," he says, without even having to turn around. He does it, anyway, because Schlatt gets annoyed if Tommy doesn't give him enough 'reverence', whatever that means.

"Hey, kid." It takes everything in Tommy not to flinch at the nickname, although the tone that he says it in is unreadable. "I was looking for you."

His blood runs cold. "Oh. Sorry." He doesn't know what he's apologizing for, not really. "I finished up with all the—" *chores*. "—tasks you gave me, and I thought I would be helpful by clarifying a few more statements with Niki." He taps his finger on the desk and then stops when he realizes what he's doing, tucking them against his palm.

Schlatt looks between them. Niki has her hands tucked in her lap, back ramrod straight, and eyes lowered in an acknowledgement of his authority. She's not shaking, but it's a near thing. Schlatt would probably assume it's fear, but Tommy knows, by the set of her jaw, that it isn't fear at all. Thankfully, she has enough will to live not to pursue her anger.

"She's been in that cell for an awfully long time, hasn't she?" he asks, head tilted as he considers her.

Tommy frowns, caught off guard. "Yes, but—"

"Are you sure she hasn't outlived her usefulness?"

His breath stutters in his throat, and Tommy freezes. Schlatt says it in that particular tone of his, when he's trying to phrase it like a true question, even though it's a suggestion. An order, almost, to think like he wants.

"No!" he says, a little too forcefully. A little too honestly. "No, she's been very useful. There's still so much we don't understand about deviants, and she's—" he meets Niki's eyes, briefly, and finds his own desperation mirrored back. "She's the key to it. A lice sample to be able to talk to any time we want?" He shakes his head. "That's invaluable."

The worst part is that he knows what his word is worth, to this man. He knows that if Schlatt says she needs to go, then she'll be shipped off the Cyberlife in the next breath. His word, despite being the main investigator of the deviancy problem, is worthless to humans.

It's utterly and completely unfair, and Tommy burns inside like he's never burned before.

Schlatt stares at Niki for a long time. He crosses the room with heavy steps, only to stare at her from closer, down the ridge of his nose. "We need a deviant deconstructed though, right?"

His heart stutters. "Well... yes. But not this one. This one, we need alive. *Active*," he corrects himself.

Before anyone can react, Schlatt reaches out, fingers pinching around Niki's chin to wrench her head up, and it's like watching a car crash in slow motion. He can see the invisible hackles rising along her skin, her eyes flaring to life with indignation. Meanwhile, Schlatt, oblivious to the dangerous predator he's touching without consent, turns her head this way and that. "I don't see what's so special about it."

He reaches for her hair, but before he can get there—before the spark in Niki's eyes can catch—Tommy jerks, hand wrapping around Schlatt's wrist.

And then the three of them stare at each other, all equally shocked—but no more so than Tommy—at the movement.

The slap registers before anything else, a sharp sting against his cheek that sends him back into his chair. Tommy hunches over instinctively, palm pressed flat against his raw skin to protect it from further harm. He's shocked more than anything—he didn't think Schlatt would ever touch him outside the four walls of his home.

"How dare you—" Niki seethes, shoving out of her chair, hands braced against the table like she's about to leap over it and claw his eyes out. Schlatt lights up with the excuse he was waiting for, and it's only then that Tommy realizes this whole thing was a setup. The perfect excuse to get exactly what he wanted.

And despite the way his body shakes with the phantom sensation of last night, the thought of Niki being deconstructed hurts worse. So he stands, placing himself between them, eyes on Schlatt's chin in the deference he craves so badly. "I'm sorry," he says above the sounds of seething coming from behind him. "I'm sorry, that was—that was completely out of line. But you can't hurt her."

"Oh I can't?" he asks, eyes wide with the challenge.

Tommy backpedals. "You could, of course. You have full authority here. But it wouldn't solve anything." His chest heaves with his frantic breaths, and so much of his focus is going into making his LED steady. He feels like a doll with the stitches loose around the limbs—jelly legged and fraying at the seams. "I will catch us a deviant to deconstruct," he promises. "But it's better for Niki to be our test subject because I know her temperament. I know how to handle her."

Schlatt leans back a little, but it seems to be working. There's less violence in his eyes. "And what if she steps out of line?"

"She won't," he says instantly, and he feels more than anything else how she settles back into her chair. "She won't. But if she does, then we'll find another deviant to serve as a test subject. And Cyberlife can deconstruct her."

The words are so bitter, so disgusting, on his tongue that he almost gags. He holds it together, though. For Niki, and for Wilbur, who can't stand to lose anyone else.

Schlatt's eyes slide past him, landing on Niki's unimpressive form. She's making herself look smaller and weak. Like less of a threat. "Okay," he says eventually, raising his hands in surrender. A sleazy grin spreads across his face. "You convinced me, kid." He reaches out, hand running, briefly, through his hair. It makes him flinch in a way that he can't quite control, and that makes Schlatt look pleased. "Finish up your chat quickly. I've got some more stuff for you to do."

And just like he came, Schlatt is gone.

Nobody moves, even as the door slam shuts behind him, boxing them into a peace and quiet that doesn't feel that way, not even a little bit. They remain still, hearts hammering in their chests like frightened rabbits, ears twitching as they follow Schlatt's heavy footsteps. As soon as they're out of range, Tommy steps toward her.

His cheek still stings with electricity from the hit, and he can't help but wonder, in that distant, distracted way, if it's visible. If there's some mark—blue, surely, if any, like his blood—that displays the behind-the-scenes of their tumultuous relationship. A peak behind the curtain, if you will.

He doesn't think about it for very long.

Niki flinches, instinctively, as he steps closer, but he doesn't let that deter him. He lays a gentle hand on the crook of her elbow, fingers twitching when they touch her skin. Neither of them peels back their skin, though, and for that, Tommy is grateful. "It's okay," he says, trying for soft and comforting. It comes out rough. He tilts his head down to create the illusion of intimacy. As if they aren't huddled in a cold, dark interrogation cell after fighting for their fucking lives. "I won't let them take you apart."

There are tears slowly gathering in the corners of her eyes, but there's a resolute set to her mouth. She had once confided that since deviating, her emotions were more potent. Having no idea how to control them, she often found herself crying at the slightest provocation.

He isn't sure if this is one of those situations, though. It seems pretty big, pretty traumatic. Something worthy of crying over.

She smiles, and Tommy is struck by how heartbreaking her expression is. How bitter and resigned she looks. "That's pretty deviant of you," she says, like it's some big inside joke between the two of them.

Tommy freezes, hands instinctively drawing away. "I'm not a *deviant*."

Her face glazes over—an unreadable mask settling over her features, obscuring her emotions from him. "Is that really such a bad thing?" Her tone, too, is unreadable. If he had to place it, he would say it was displeased. Or maybe just tired. She looked tired more and more everyday, harsh, gaunt lines drawn on her face. "To be like me?"

And Tommy doesn't immediately refute it. He can't.

He sees her budding disapproval bubbling between the cracks in her mask and rushes to fill the silence. "No, Niki—"

"How do you do it?" she asks, but it doesn't sound like a genuine question. Her eyes are narrowed, and her hands flex with excess, nervous energy. She doesn't like confrontation, but she's braver than he is; she doesn't shy away from the things that make her scared. "How do you delude yourself so well? How can you say such contradictory things with such confidence and never realize?"

Tommy reaches out for her, then, but she pulls back, arms slipping around herself in a pitiful mimicry of a hug.

"How can you speak of deviants with such vitriol, such disgust, and yet treat me kindly? How can you bear to be around me, then, since you find us so repulsive?"

Tommy flinches worse than he had when Schlatt smacked him. "Niki—"

"Or have you done such a good job separating me from the others?" Her eyes are narrowed and glossy and *sharp*. He can feel her glaze ripping through his skin, spilling his blood. "A domesticated animal is much different from its wild counterpart, no? Is that all I am to you? A pet? Something to come crawling to when you need entertainment or uncomplicated affection?"

Her jaw is set, and emotions continue to spill through the cracks in her mask. There are too many of them to name—her expression truly is a thing of painful beauty; complex, conflicting emotions like fine paint across her features—and yet, Tommy still tries.

Irritation and rage and betrayal. Guilt and sorrow and bitter resignation. Determination.

"Of course not," he breathes into the air, despite the way he still shrinks back from her rage, from her pointed barbs. He is scared of what will come of this interaction, yes—he can't stand to lose anymore—but it doesn't make anything about him less sincere. If anything, he thinks it might make him even more genuine.

Niki swallows. "Do you even realize the power imbalance here?" She takes a step forward. Tommy takes one back. "You are *literally* the only thing keeping me alive." It's an unfair assessment but not an untrue one. "And what, the second I upset you or—or you deem me useless, you snap your fingers and I die?"

Tommy shakes his head so hard his vision spins. "I would never do that."

She looks at him, dead in the eyes, and he wonders if there truly are any cracks in her mask, or if he can just read her so easily now. She looks at him, and Tommy can nearly hear his final words to Schlatt echoing in the silence. His false, desperate platitudes that her death was assured.

The worst part of it is that those words aren't even lies; Niki's death was assured the second Tommy laid eyes on her in that attic.

He watches her face as she realizes this. The tears wet her cheeks, and she takes a step back, as if suddenly realizing how dangerous Tommy is. She looks at him, then, as if she's truly seeing him for the first time. "...Wouldn't you?"

Tommy sucks in a breath that rattles around his lungs. He doesn't let it back out.

Niki sighs, and it shudders out of her in a whisper. "I'm tired of coddling you, Tommy," she says, and every line of her gaunt face is seeped in exhaustion. "You're either a deviant and capable of caring about me, or you can't. You're either my friend, or..." she trails off, eyes raising to Tommy's face in one last hope. A challenge to prove her wrong.

But he can't.

Niki sighs again, and it feels like bitter resignation. No matter what, Tommy has always seen her as strong—someone who refused to give up, even when locked away in a jail cell, awaiting her sentence. Determined.

And she looks, now, in that ugly fluorescent light, so utterly defeated.

"Take me back to my cell."

A hand gripping his heart, Tommy does.

Chapter End Notes

The encounter with Techno was one of the very first things I wrote for this fic, over a year ago. Since it was one of the first, I was really exploring how an android character would think and feel and translate emotions into more clinical, sensational sense. I had to re-write the entire thing because, as it was, would have read as completely out of character. The scene also, having not touched it since I wrote it, was a lot lower than my usual standard, which I was actually pretty pleased to see. I've grown a lot as a writer since starting this fic.

It still hurt a little to re-write it. I remember being so utterly proud of what I had written and very little of the actual lines of writing were used :(Still, it just means I've grown :)

wilbur's quasi-interlude

Chapter Summary

Wilbur thinks some thoughts and then commits some crimes.

Chapter Thirty-Five: Wilbur's Quasi-Interlude

There are no words to describe it. In his usually-eloquent, sufficiently dramatic internal monologues, there is only silence—an empty space where noise and words and life used to fill it. There has been only silence since he lost Tommy. Like it's a messy divorce, and Tommy got custody of his heart as well as his words. All the dumb, meaningless things that separate him from the rest of the lonely, desperate alcoholics.

And at first, it's... well, it's not okay. Wilbur misses his words, and he misses Tommy, and he hates himself for missing Tommy, and then he just hates himself, plain and simple, because a few weeks of therapy and a few months with Tommy couldn't fix that. Maybe that's just a confirmation that he can't be fixed. That something inside him was born this way. A washing machine missing a seemingly vital part, and although Phil called the company, they simply refused to replace it because— Well, because they didn't think it was all that vital. The washing machine still washes, right? So it can't be broken, even if the dishes come out wet and soggy but not *clean* and—

Okay, this metaphor is getting away from him. The point is—the point is that at first it's kind of shit, but at least his mind is blank. It's silent—a wasteland devoid of critical thoughts, whited-out by copious amounts of alcohol and the shock of losing someone he thought was well and truly different. And it's not good, but it's not miserable because he's drunk off his ass most of the time—head clogged and fuzzy, with only a few snippets he tries to call memories—and because he doesn't have his words.

He doesn't have his words, and so he can't think about Tommy. He can't wax lyrical poetry about his betrayal or even find the words as he sobs into Techno's shoulder on some of his lowest nights. He doesn't have to worry about that, not yet, so he just shatters short glasses he no longer needs and bashes his guitar on the ground in a faux-cathartic smash, broken strings making a sound that's almost funny but not quite.

And then he has to see Tommy, and it's even worse. He sticks by Schlatt's side like an uncomfortable shadow, and it hurts to even look at him, but Wilbur does, as much as he can stand. He drinks in the image of him because he doesn't know how often he'll get to see him,

especially in his—their—home. It's a messy picture—broken glass on the ground, and Tommy's acidic shock when he sees one of Wilbur's most beloved possessions shattered on the ground like it doesn't even matter—but he still takes it in. Still hangs it lovingly in the museum of his mind.

He does get his words, after that, and it's even worse than he ever could imagine. He gets his words back and with them, they bring the doubt.

Endless noise circles in his mind, whirring thoughts that nearly blur his vision as much as the alcohol perpetually running through his system nowadays. Images of their final confrontation, of the unusual tension in Tommy's body, in his reluctance to meet Wilbur's eyes. In his speech pattern, in the words that he used. Everything about it was wrong, alien. It wasn't his Tommy.

That thing in the evidence locker wasn't his Tommy. It was foreign and uncaring and cold where Tommy was warm. It wasn't his words or his mannerisms or his body language. It was something completely different, which meant that it had to be Cyberlife. Because despite how human he acted, Tommy is still a machine. One that Cyberlife has intimate access to, through George and that DREAM program.

That does bring up the question of why? Why would Cyberlife want to break them up? Was it productivity, like they claimed, or something else? Could they tell how close Tommy was to the very thing they feared? Is that why they pulled the trigger?

In the end, that isn't the important thing. The why's don't matter so much as the solution to the problem, and although Wilbur isn't any closer to one, he still tries to corral his endless thoughts in a semi-productive direction.

He ends up confronting Tommy in a different evidence locker this time, which feels symbolic in a way his hungover brain can't connect. He poses the questions that have been bothering him so, carefully monitoring Tommy's reaction to each and every one.

And he does not disappoint. There are little cracks in his mask that allow Wilbur to see right through it. It doesn't really make him feel better though. So what if these aren't Tommy's words? So what if this wasn't Tommy's decision? He's still lost to Wilbur. If anything, this makes it much more tragic because Wilbur doesn't know how to help. He doesn't know how to oppose Cyberlife, to relinquish their white-knuckled grip on Tommy. Before, at least he fooled himself into thinking Tommy had a choice in the matter.

The confrontation doesn't really solve anything. Wilbur sinks back into his den, full of shattered glass and alcohol stains and so, completely empty. Sometimes, on his more clear-headed days, he researches androids. He reads up on articles full of theory on the hows and whys of deviancy written by computer programmers that had no idea what they were talking about. He tries to craft some kind of game plan—an escape for Tommy, if he needs it. He doesn't come up with anything solid, other than half-formed thoughts he had written down before being consumed by frustration and dealing with that the only way he knows how.

He thinks he'll be trapped in this cycle forever. Drink, be hungover, try to formulate a plan to save Tommy—who he doesn't even know needs saving; this could just be him, a desire to be

a savior for once instead of the saved—get frustrated, quit, and repeat.

Techno stays by him, for once. He cooks him meals that are better than anything Tommy tried to do and tries to talk him into resuming therapy, but the idea has lost its appeal. Maybe, when the wounds have closed over, he'll consider it again.

But for now, he loses himself in his cycle, passing out in a drunken haze more often than not, only to wake up feeling like he got no sleep, with a cotton-filled mouth, a pulsing headache, and a distant nausea.

Tonight is one such night. He passed out shortly ago, and although time loses all meaning in this state, he can tell he hasn't been asleep for very long. It's light and fitful, interspersed with brief periods of wakefulness that have him groaning in frustration and pushing his sweat-damp pillow over his face as if he could smother himself to sleep. Already, he can feel the pounding of another truly heinous headache racing along the base of his skull.

When he truly wakes to the sound of the knocking on his door—which, despite its comparatively soft sound, still reverberates around in his aching skull—it's after what feels like five minutes of sleep. An annoyed glance at his phone—it takes a minute to find, lost somewhere in his bedsheets—confirms he hadn't slept very long at all, and that it is deep into the night.

Which raises the question of who would be knocking at his door.

The most likely option is Techno, and while it's still impressive that they've found their way back here—their relationship not quite repaired, but, at the very least, restored to a time before their relationship-shattering argument—it can't be Techno. He's been pressing the importance of healthy habits, including a proper amount of sleep.

His bed is too warm—damp with sweat and tears, probably, and also some spilled beer. It stinks and everything is sticky, the heat in the house cranked to combat the cold outside.

Wilbur sways as he detangles himself from his comforter, limbs flailing as they catch on the fabric. Hair sticks to the back of his neck, and he stumbles in the dark, catching himself on his door frame. He flicks the hall light on after a minute of aimlessly groping the wall, only to hiss and squint once he finds it. The light truly does him no good.

"One fucking minute," he calls out after a particularly loud knock, although they've been waning in strength and frequency. Scrubbing the sleep and sweat from his eyes, he follows the familiar path of destruction until he reaches the front door. He undoes the lock and yanks it open, allowing the cold air to wash in. It smooths along his damp skin in a temporary relief—delicious now, but soon to be horrid once his sweat cools.

The sounds of rain greet him as he pulls open the door, as does its earthy smell. He doesn't stop the door from banging into the wall. "*What?*" he demands and then promptly sucks in a sharp, surprised breath. "Tommy?"

He blinks. The combination of the cold air blowing into his baggy t-shirt and the shock wakes him up. He thinks this is real, although he isn't sure. He's been dreaming of Tommy an

awful lot, and his head still feels fuzzy with the remnants of alcohol in his system.

But it's Tommy, standing on his pitiful porch, soaked through to the bone with Wilbur's missing hoodie pulled over his head. It's a cold, bitter rain—one that verges on the edge of snow and that freezes when it hits the ground, turning into dewy ice droplets that cling to the blades of grass and that gather in a sheet that slicks the driveway. And in that cold, bitter rain, he makes a pitiful sight.

Water beads on his shoes, nearly freezing on the tops. It soaks into his clothes, slicks his hair against the shape of his skull, drips into his rapidly blinking eyes. It traces a path that tears must take, down his cheeks to linger on the edge of his chin. His LED is red, and the light catches on his wet face and his glassy eyes, shrouding him in angry light.

"Hi," he says, unsure, but such a return to the Tommy he knows that Wilbur blinks again, uncomprehending. His hands are gripping the soaked fabric of his sleeves, nails digging into his elbows. He's shaking, violently—full-bodied shivers that almost have his teeth chattering. He looks so painfully human, despite everything about him that is not.

"Can I come in?" he asks, then. He sounds, well—he doesn't sound sure of himself, not at all. But he sounds like he's *trying* to be sure. Like he's feeling so violently uncomfortable standing on his porch in the middle of the night, garnering his attention, but that he's trying to ignore it. Ignore the tension that has accumulated between them.

Wilbur still isn't sure how to feel about this. His emotions never settle long enough for him to figure it out, a turbulent churning deep in his gut not dissimilar to nausea. This is his best friend. His brother. Standing on his porch after unequivocally ripping his heart out in a series of several short, yet heartbreaking, interactions. Looking like a drowned pupping, eyes wide and glossy, bottom lip nearly trembling from what? The *cold*? Can androids even feel cold?

But he sounds like he's trying to be sure, and for some reason, it convinces him, too.

Wilbur steps back, holding the door out enough for Tommy to slip in, ducking under his arm. He stands on the mat with shoes that ooze water and with a body that drips it, too, streaming from his hair and his suit every time he so much as breathes.

And Wilbur doesn't say anything because he doesn't have to. Because somehow, the unspoken understanding settles back into place between them like it never left; they don't have to explain. It shouldn't be that easy; it's kind of a slap in the face, and Wilbur wants to be offended—he thinks he might be, deep down—but it's just how it is.

He shuts and locks the door, and then he turns on the kitchen light as he passes by, ducking into the bathroom for a fresh towel. He finds a few crumpled on the ground, but they're dry and don't smell awful, so he grabs the one on top.

Tommy is still standing on the mat, and Wilbur isn't sure how much of that is out of politeness and how much is uncertainty. He's squinting down at his shoes, and, after a moment, he comes to a decision and steps out of them; and, like so many times before, he neatly places them against the wall. His socks still aren't much better. They're oozing bitter water that would have turned a human's toes black with frostbite.

Wilbur steps forward with the towel automatically, hands already reaching up to dry him like he used to do with Fundy. He aborts the motion halfway, and his hands hang between them, intent clear. It's overly familiar, and right now, the last thing he wants to do is make Tommy uncomfortable and drive him away (*again*).

He stops but not before Tommy can take in the movement and its meaning. They don't say anything, though, and eventually Wilbur hands over the towel and disappears down the hallway.

He feels like maybe he should be angry. And maybe he should be, because Tommy had tossed him aside like old gum—chewed up only to be spit out when it lost its flavor—and because Wilbur had never stopped trying, every interaction only resulting in a door slamming in his face. Because despite that, here Tommy is, asking for his help and his hospitality or whatever else he wants. Whatever else Wilbur is willing to give.

(For Tommy? Everything.)

But despite it all, he was so sure that Tommy was a deviant. And despite his frighteningly low opinion of himself and belief in his abilities, Wilbur *knows* he isn't wrong. Not about this.

Tommy isn't as slick as he must think he is. His expressions are transparent, once Wilbur actually takes the time to look, and he's had more than enough time to think lately.

So yeah, maybe he should be angry. Maybe it would make him feel better—less numb; less like he wants to sink into the bottom of an amber bottle and never find his way out again—but it's not what he feels. No matter how hard he probes the open, gaping wound, he can't force himself to feel angry.

He just feels tired and worn out. He just wants a home and family without having to fight for them. He just wants peace, for once.

Wilbur ducks into his bedroom for something that Tommy can wear. His clothes are back in piles on the ground—he is a creature of habit, after all—but since he's only been rotating through a few outfits regardless of if they're clean, there are still some mostly clean clothes, left over from his selective attention. He roots through the assorted piles until he finds wrinkled, balled-up clothes that smell fresh enough.

When he returns, Tommy is still exactly where he left him. It's a bit disconcerting to find him so still, so unsure of himself. He's become used to a Tommy that takes. A Tommy that doesn't linger in doorways or shift his weight between his feet in furrowed contemplation. A Tommy that inserts himself into a situation, into the cracks of his life.

And yet he hasn't moved. The dull light from the kitchen illuminates him more, revealing sopping wet bangs plastered to his forehead and a glazed, distracted gaze as he dutifully towels off. Wilbur can't help but watch him, brow furrowed and bundle of clothes tucked against his cocked hip.

"What are you doing here?" he asks when the silence becomes too much for him. Tommy pauses, eyes meeting his before immediately skirting away. He presses the towel to the rest of his body, squeezing excess water from the hoodie and the loose edges of his pants. He doesn't answer, and Wilbur lets the moment pass by without pressing.

Tommy stands up properly after stripping off his sodden socks; his spine straightens out until it places him at his proper height—only a few inches shorter than Wilbur. It's only then that he realizes just how much Tommy had been slouching, lowering himself, making his body smaller.

It's a dumb thought when he's seen Tommy leap off roofs and grapple with deviants, but there's something incredibly fragile about him. It makes Wilbur want to wire his jaw shut, if he thought it would stop him from making an offensive comment.

He wonders if this is how it was in the early days of his grief. If his family looked at him and saw someone small and fragile, splintered and fractured and one good breeze away from dissolving into dust. He wonders if he ever looked this pathetic—drowned and sopping with water, and with a frown that isn't *quite* a frown, but still gives the general air of a frown. He wonders if he had ever radiated this much sadness and regret and resignation

He thinks maybe he had. He thinks he understands Phil and Techno a little better.

Without a word, he hands over the bundle tucked against him when Tommy reaches out for it. He lets Tommy pass by him, his cold, wet sleeve brushing against Wilbur's sleep-heated skin as he goes. He listens for the closing of the bathroom door and only then does he move to the thermostat, cranking it up in the hopes that it might get warm enough to stop Tommy's shaking.

When Tommy comes out, he looks only marginally better. Wilbur's sweatpants are still loose on him, tied tightly at the waist and with the hem rolled up. The sweatshirt is large, too, but it gets him out of his wet clothes, which are not on his person. He must have left them in a wet heap in the bathroom, which is something Wilbur should attend to. Left alone, they'll get musty and gross and possibly delay Tommy's departure.

Wilbur leaves them alone, pushing them to the very back of his mind.

Instead, he jerks his head towards the couch in a silent invitation that Tommy—after only a moment's hesitation—takes. He sinks down on the couch and something shudders in his face. Some undefined emotion that has him closing his eyes and tipping his head until it meets the back of the couch.

The problem, now, is that Wilbur has no idea what to do. Going back to bed seems like the wrong answer, despite the way his eyelids are beginning to droop with the departure of his brief adrenaline rush. But Tommy is reluctant to talk as he pulls himself back together, draping the towel over the top of his head to slow the drip of water; and Wilbur is reluctant to push.

So he stands a good few feet back from the couch, nearly swaying on his feet as he struggles with indecision. "So," he says, drawing the word out as he desperately searches for an ending.

"How have you been?"

The silence that follows—not quite as oppressive with the strange melancholy that had filled it—almost makes him laugh. It's a dumb question, one that makes Tommy blink and turn towards him, a question on his face. It's stupid to pretend that Wilbur hasn't been watching him obsessively at work and thinking about him at home. He bites his lip under the scrutiny to stop the manic smile from spreading.

"I'm fine," Tommy answers, brow still furrowed.

He waits for a follow-up that never comes. "And Niki?" He hasn't been able to see her since the partner transfer. He hasn't known if he's allowed to, or if his company would even be welcomed, anymore.

Tommy's face does something weird at that—it shudders again, but unlike the one before, he desperately fights to keep it down. His lips pressed together, eyes darting away before back. "She's fine." He pauses, reaching up to grab the ends of the towel over his head. He pulls down and the towel blooms with dampness. "We aren't—I haven't really been talking to her much, recently."

"Oh? Why not?"

"She's upset with me," he says after a long pause. Wilbur steps forward, bracing his hip on the back of the couch. This close, it allows him a much more accurate read of Tommy. "I upset her," he corrects. His LED is still cycling red, barely peeking out from the towel. That strikes him as odd, though he supposes very few things about this situation are *comfortable* for Tommy.

Still, red seems a bit extreme. A blinking yellow? Totally appropriate. A steady red? Less appropriate but understandable.

But a blinking red?

"—said something that upset her," Tommy is saying when Wilbur pries his focus away from his LED. "And, well, she made it pretty clear that she didn't want to speak to me until—" he looks down at his hands in his lap, at the bloom of thirium around his nail bed. "—well, unless I rectify my mistake."

"Oh." Tommy blinks then, harshly, although his face is completely blank. At first, Wilbur assumes he's trying to clear his eyes or draw his focus away from his thoughts, but it keeps going on. It's a little unsettling. "I'm sorry. That sucks. I'm sure if—"

"Do you have any thirium?" Tommy asks suddenly, face scrunched. Wilbur blinks. "It's just —" And then words are spilling out of him. "Sometimes, android systems require a thirium replacement. Too old of thirium increases the risk factor for problems, and the warning just popped up in my vision—" he gestures, uselessly, at the air in front of him. "—and it's annoying."

"Tommy," Wilbur says slowly. Tommy looks at him then, and there's a certain blank glossiness to his eyes. "Androids don't need thirium replacements." Since the creation of mission 'Free-Tommy', he's done a rather exorbitant amount of research. The chances of a 'thirium replacement' not coming up in that?

Miniscule, if even that.

He looks at Tommy then—really looks at him—and it's only then that he notices the blooming blue stain on the towel over his head.

"Are you *hurt*?" he asks, standing up rapidly. He reaches for the towel, but Tommy jerks back, pushing himself off the couch and into an unsteady stance. He clamps a hand over the blue, a look of wild defiance on his face.

"Can you just get me some fucking thirium?" he asks—*cries*, really—a note of pure desperation and panic creeping in. Wilbur gapes at him, taking in the thirium and the red LED and the previous odd, rhythmic blinking. The pieces connect rapidly, like magnets clicking together, and he feels his heart drop.

Because the only other time he's seen this kind of behavior from Tommy was after Stratford. After he had nearly shut down and was still shaking with the negative effects on his system.

"Shit," Wilbur breathes, alarmed and emphatic. He wastes no more time on useless questions, choosing instead to stumble to his room. George had given them too many bags to count, but even then, Wilbur had felt uneasy. Call it whatever you want: irrational paranoia, smart planning, whatever. He had bought more, and now it was actually paying off.

He returns with several clasped in his hands. Tommy grabs them immediately, twisting off the top and downing it in one gulp. He's already twisting the top off a second one when Wilbur reaches forward, gently lifting the towel off his head. His hair is wet and matted with blue blood, enough so that he can't even see what's causing it.

Wilbur ducks into the kitchen, wetting a paper towel. "Jesus. Why didn't you say anything sooner?" He had just let Wilbur prattle on like an idiot. Gently, he brushes aside Tommy's hair and wipes at the thirium. "Is this why you're here?"

"I needed thirium," he says, defensively. "And it's too late for any Cyberlife store to be open."

Wilbur represses the urge to sigh and pinch the bridge of his nose. This must be what it feels like to be Phil. "You came here," he says. "With a count-down until you shut down forever. Without knowing if I would have thirium or not."

Tommy's shoulders are up to his ears, and although he can't see his face, he doesn't need to imagine it.

The most annoying part is that this isn't going to help. It's just going to make Tommy more defensive, more distant. And even though Wilbur is so frustrated with him all of the sudden,

it can't matter. He goes back to dabbing at the back of his head. "Why didn't Schlatt have any?"

"We ran out."

"You... ran out." He doesn't like the implications of that—Tommy didn't get nearly that hurt during his longer time here, but he supposes the first month was slow—but he lets it slide. "And why didn't he get more?"

Tommy just shrugs, a jerky, uncomfortable movement, and lets them fall back into silence. Thirium is still beading against his scalp, but he's beginning to actually see the wound.

It isn't pretty; a harsh, thick gash over the top of and down the back of his skull. It oozes thirium from its jagged, broken edges, and, as he watches, he can see the edge of various wires. Thankfully, none of them are clipped, but the wound is still way out of his level of expertise. He doesn't even know where to start.

But he can't leave it like this, either. They only have so much thirium, and they won't be able to get more until the morning.

More than anything, he needs to know how Tommy got this wound. This late, it's improbable—but not impossible—that they would have a case. It's not impossible that some deviant attacked him.

But there's a nauseating, sinking feeling in his gut that he recognizes, even in his addled brain—still fuzzy with sleep and alcohol. He prays it's just a construct of his impressively low opinion of Schlatt and his everlasting paranoia.

Besides, it doesn't matter right now. What matters is that Tommy is still bleeding out.

"I don't—" Wilbur cuts himself off, letting out a slow breath. He thinks about what he needs to do to close this wound. He thinks about how he can make that happen with his limited options. He draws up a terrible, hasty plan and doesn't think twice when he opens his mouth. "Okay. Okay. I have a plan. It's not gonna be good. Neither of us are going to like it. But it will get the wound closed."

Tommy turns around and follows his gaze, to the kitchen. He sucks in a stuttered breath but, after a moment, he must realize the truly unfortunate: it's the only way. "Alright."

Wilbur turns into the kitchen and opens the cutlery drawer. He sorts through the butter knives until he finds the most fucked up one: scratched to all hell, dull, with a bit of rust around the handle. Then, he brings it over to his stove, watching the low flame spring to life—blue and orange and flickering. He nestles the blade into the flame and watches as it heats up to avoid looking at Tommy.

The house is filled with the sound of the gas, of the flickering flames, the ticking clock, and his own breath, which sounds far too loud in his ears.

"Why... do you and Schlatt hate each other?" It's careful, cautious, tentative, and it comes out of fucking nowhere. It's far too much like the Tommy that used to be and not the Tommy he knows. Or maybe that's unfair to put him in a box—to limit him to being bold and loud and larger than life itself. Maybe it's unfair to assume that just because he's grown, he still can't exhibit traits of what he used to be. Reductionist.

Wilbur considers the question with a tilt of his head. "I don't suppose he would've mentioned it."

"He did, a little." He sneaks a look at Tommy, but from here, he can only see the back of his head. The kitchen light haloes him, catching on the wet, matted curls plastered to the back of his skull. "But I don't... really trust his judgement."

There's something there, in his tone, that sounds telling. If Wilbur were smart enough or less shaky—hands white-knuckled around the handle of the knife—or in a state where he could afford to divide his attention, he might be able to read him.

But off of tone of voice alone, and as distracted as he is, he can only press his lips together and try to formulate an answer.

"We... used to be best friends. It sounds elementary to call us that, but that's kind of what it was. We knew each other in the academy and then we became partners." He turns the knife; already, there are splotches of blackened metal. "I think the problem was that we were too similar. It's why we hit it off so well—same sense of humor, same intense work ethic, same competitive spirit.

"We both wanted to win so badly, to prove we were so smart, and our matched competition only fueled us further. A self-sustaining fire." He picks at the rust in the unseen crevices of the handle with his fingernail. "But a flame can only burn so bright before it goes out. And, well, I had a support system behind me. That was the difference, I think.

"Despite having a kid so young, I was good at balancing family and work. And I had Sally. She—" he sighs, remembering his wayward, firecracker of a wife. He wonders how she's doing, if she's found joy out there somewhere. She always wanted to travel, more than Wilbur was willing to. More than being a mother afforded her. "Well, she worked from home, and she worked light hours, and she didn't mind taking care of us. So when I worked long hours, on the threat of burning out, I had someone to take care of me.

"And Schlatt didn't." He tries to keep himself in the here and now, in this exact moment, but it's hard. He keeps wandering to the past—where his son and wife and best friend greet him, when things weren't so twisted and fucked up—and when he pulls himself back, he keeps leaping ahead to the future—the smell of burning plastic fills his nose and whatever wounded noises Tommy might make fill his ears.

"When it came time for a promotion, and when our performance was so similar, it came down to who Phil thought was more stable. Who could handle the added responsibility. A man with a wife and a kid and brother and father behind him, or a man on his own. It's obvious what choice he'd make."

Wilbur pulls back the knife, watches it smoke and steam in the air, then puts it back. He has no idea how hot it needs to be, but he doesn't want to risk fucking it up and having to do it again. He won't put Tommy through that. "Of course, from Schlatt's perspective, it seemed like pure nepotism. And maybe that was part of it; I'm not naïve enough to ignore that. But no matter what I said, Schlatt resented me for it.

"He hid it well, at first, and even in the instances where I saw it, I didn't want to risk upsetting him or our partnership by bringing it up. So I didn't, and his resentment only festered until he couldn't stand me. We were always a—" he rolls different words on his tongue. "—a *spirited* pair, but our fights got more frequent and less friendly. And eventually, he asked for us to be split apart."

It felt like a betrayal then, too. Despite it being the only outcome that would leave them both *whole*—without scratching chunks of their souls away, caught beneath their jagged nails—it was the biggest blow before...

Before the end of his world.

He peters out into silence, twisting and turning the knife over the flame like it's a marshmallow on a stick.

It's going to suck. Not as much as having it pressed to his own skin, but Tommy can't see his wound. He can't press the heated blade against it to cauterize it, which means Wilbur is going to have to. He'll be the one making his skin hiss and fizzle, the only making him curse and produce whatever pained reactions.

It's too reminiscent of what an asshole he was when they first met; his throat tightens, like how it does right before he throws up.

He hears a sharp intake of shuddery, shaky breath, and when he looks up, Tommy is leaning over the top of the TV, eyes wide. He looks up at Wilbur, then. "I thought—"

"That I broke it?" Well, he can't exactly blame Tommy, considering the current state of his house. The carnage still strewn across his floors that Techno didn't bother with. "I couldn't bear to look at it, but I couldn't—" he breathes out, shaking his head. He couldn't bear to look at it, but he couldn't bear to destroy it, either.

So he'd tucked it away for safekeeping, like he had so many years before. He is, first and foremost it seems, a creature of habit.

"Oh," Tommy says, and the word feels too little for the emotion he imparts. He looks, vaguely, like he's going to cry—brows drawn down against glazed eyes, lip bitten, and hands pressing against the wound on his head. When he speaks next, he sounds small. "That's—I'm glad."

Time keeps on ticking. Tommy breaks open another packet of thirium and drains it, grimacing at how it only increases the pulse of blood out of the wound. Wilbur bites his lip to avoid caving immediately, but, when the handle begins to feel hot as well, he finally pulls it away. He turns off the stove and then approaches with slow, careful steps.

Tommy watches him like a prey animal, hands tightened into fists on the couch cushion, smearing thirium onto the couch.

"I'm not gonna lie," he says, as someone who hasn't had but seen a wound cauterized before. "This is gonna suck." The officer had screamed so loud and nearly bitten through the belt they'd placed between his teeth. Wilbur could only wince in sympathy. "But it will only last a few seconds." A few, agonizing seconds that must feel like minutes. But a few seconds all the same. "Are you ready?"

Tommy lets out a quiet, stuttering breath and nods. "Fuck it," he says, nearly sounding like his old self. The skin of the back half of his skull, including his bushy hair, shimmers until it's gone. It exposes his plastic skull, round and smooth and marred by the jagged cut.

"Okay." Wilbur places a hand on the back of his skull, just so Tommy can get used to the touch. He jolts, anyway, breath shuddering and muscles tensing. "On the count of three, okay?" He takes his own steadying breath, raising the knife until it's lined up with the gash. One clean shot at this. That's all he has, and, as he steels himself, that's all he needs.

"One." Both breathe in, chests expanding in tandem. "Two." Wilbur tightens his grip until there's no blood left in his hand. "Three." He jerks forward, pressing the long side of the knife against the gash. Immediately, the plastic smokes.

Tommy makes a horrific choked sound, but he doesn't jerk away. That, in and of itself, is a blessing. Wilbur's jaw is clenched so hard that his jaw must be at risk of breaking, but he doesn't pull away, either. He holds the knife against the back of his skull until the gash closes over, plastic shriveling and wrinkling under the heat. Only when the smell burns too much, deep in the back of his nose and throat, does he pull away.

Blue blood and chunks of melted plastic cling to the blade, but at least the wound is closed. He waits a few seconds until it cools before gently rubbing his thumb over the textured, puckered scar. "See? Not too bad," he says, hysterical.

Tommy makes another choked sound and slumps onto the couch, head tilted back. His eyes are squeezed shut, face slick with thirium and rain. His chest expands and deflates too fast. "Fuck you," he says, voice rough and weak, and Wilbur huffs out a laugh. "I'm okay, though. Thanks."

It feels wrong to be thanked for inflicting pain, but it was, in the end, necessary. Wilbur goes back to the kitchen, hands shaking so badly, desperate for something to do. He runs the knife under water, watching as it steams and hisses. The melted plastic and blue blood slide off, leaving spotted, blackened steel. He leaves the knife in the sink.

"It was Schlatt, wasn't it?" he says once the water shuts off, suddenly so completely sure of himself. He doesn't dare turn to look at Tommy.

The silence that follows is loud and incredibly telling. And then, Tommy says, "Yeah."

Wilbur should be shocked at the ease with which he acquired that confession—he had been mentally gearing up for a fight—but one look at Tommy makes everything clear. He looks

bone-weary, eyes opened to tiny slits that watch Wilbur's back. He looks numb to it, and Wilbur feels sick.

"But it doesn't really matter," he continues, in that deceptively light tone. "I am, after all, just an android. And he's a human. It doesn't matter."

After a moment, Wilbur approaches, footsteps soft and near silent on the transition from laminate to carpet. Eventually, he sinks down on the couch a healthy distance from Tommy. He doesn't even look at him, eyes locked on their blurry reflection in the TV screen. "And this isn't the first time."

Tommy doesn't answer, but Wilbur wasn't looking for one.

"He wanted to kill me," he says, after a long stretch of silence.

Dead silence. And then, "*What?*"

"He threw a beer bottle at my head, which isn't a novelty, but he usually misses. My bad for underestimating him, I guess." He shrugs, jerky and uncoordinated. "He never said it, but I could see it in his eyes. He was tired of dealing with me. He just wanted to take your toy away, and he was pissed off when the toy started breaking. So he decided to trash it."

"Jesus." It's all he can say, all he can get out past the horror clogging his throat. It's not nearly enough. "Tommy—"

"Wilbur," he says suddenly, urgently. He sits up and, for the first time since this conversation began, he looks truly panicked. "Wilbur, he told me not to move." The implication hangs between them, sharp and acidic on both of their tongues. "He told me not to move, and I left." He's breathing hard now. Harder than he did after getting his skin melted back together. "I saw the—the red wall, and it was so fucking cracked. I didn't even try to break it. I touched it with my fingers—" he holds up his hand, looking down at the thirium-stained fingers. "—and it fucking shattered." He looks up, wild and panicked. "That means—"

"I know what that means." Tommy is finally looking at him, then, eyes wide and hands wrapped around Wilbur's wrist, squeezing so hard it feels like his veins will burst. "I know. You don't have to say it if you can't."

He looks, through the all-consuming panic, at least a little bit relieved. His jaw trembles as he looks away, and, as Wilbur watches him sway indecisively, he takes a risk.

He reaches out, hand gently catching around the opposite side of his neck. Tommy goes easily, head bending until his burning temple rests on Wilbur's shoulder. They sit like that, in complete stillness and silence.

"It's okay, Toms," he says, and listens to the shuddering, broken breathing in his ear.

Time slips past them. He isn't sure how long they stay like that—until Tommy's breath stabilizes, at least, which speaks of a long time—but when they finally draw away from each other, no words have the chance to be exchanged. That's not to say that talking right now would be wise; they're both exhausted and wrung out, hands shaking and throats clogged with the conversation they need to have. Plus, Wilbur's head is still throbbing from the residual hangover.

The very least the universe could do, he thinks in those heart-stopping seconds after an aggressive knock shakes the door, is give them a break. Give them a chance to try and have that conversation before giving up, turning in for the night—morning?—with promises to try again when they wake next.

But in the end, the universe is harsh and cruel. Because midnight visitors are very rare, for Wilbur. And the chances of this being unrelated to the deviant on his couch?

Nonexistent.

"Fuck," Wilbur breathes after he's gotten over the initial shock, and adrenaline has jump-started his heart. Tommy, still on the couch despite the way he had jumped when he heard the knock, is breathing hard. Wilbur can see it from here—the way his chest heaves like a startled rabbit. They can die of fear, he remembers Techno telling him once. He wonders if the same is true of deviants, and that thought truly jolts him into action.

With the precious few seconds afforded to him by his hungover excuse, he assesses the room and notes everything that screams of Tommy. The wet towel is drooping off the couch, thirium staining the white in a massive explosion of damning evidence. The coffee table is littered with empty thirium bags, crumpled and still dripping with whatever's left over. He grabs everything he can see, wrapping it into one big bundle that he then shoves into Tommy's slack hands.

He blinks at the evidence but understanding never filters onto his face. He's too startled to think properly, and it shows in the way he looks up to Wilbur with wide eyes that don't hold a thought behind them.

Shit. Looks like it's up to Wilbur—hungover, groggy Wilbur with the shaky hands and even shakier breath; they totally aren't fucked—and that responsibility sits like a stone in his throat.

"Tommy," he says in a whisper, hands closing around Tommy's wrists to simultaneously tighten his hold on the evidence and pull him up from his frozen stupor. "Tommy." Their eyes meet. "You have to leave." Tommy's face scrunches up, and although Wilbur can't exactly identify it, it makes his gut clench. "Not forever. Not even for very long. Just until whoever that is—" Like cosmic fate, a second knock bangs against the door. "—is gone." He curls his hands over Tommy's, checking to make sure he has a tight grip on the bundle before letting go. "And you have to take this with you."

Disposing of evidence, obstructing justice. He's looking at criminal charges if they're able to book him for anything. But does it even matter if the charges are dumb?

"It's evidence," he says, unnecessarily, but his mind is going a mile a minute, and he doesn't want to skip over anything. Tommy is in shock, emotionally and physically battered, and Wilbur can't risk glossing over anything. He can't risk Tommy getting caught. If they catch him— "What you're going to do is go. Go somewhere they won't think to check for you, and dispose of this along the way. Drop it into the neighbors' trash cans, public ones, bury it in the fucking forest, it doesn't matter. Just make sure it can't be linked back to us, okay?"

For a moment, Tommy doesn't seem to comprehend. He's frozen, breath catching and eyes darting between his face and the door. The doorbell goes off this time, and Wilbur figures the window for his excuse is quickly closing. "Okay, Toms?" He reaches out, brushing the back of his knuckles against Tommy's face. Something seems to snap back into place; the glazed, confused look fades and is replaced with something stronger. More concrete.

More like Tommy.

He sucks in a breath, holds it for a second, and then lets it out. It comes out a lot less shuddery. "Okay," he says, hugging the bundle against his stomach. Wilbur guides him to the seldom-used back door, thanking whatever gods might exist that it wasn't snowing. That there won't be a trail of footsteps leading away from his house.

Tommy opens the door, only pausing when Wilbur calls him back long enough to shove a beanie on his head, pulling it down over the blinking LED on his temple. They loiter for another second; Wilbur trails his hands over his head, instinctively feeling for the scar on the back of his head.

The doorbell echoes throughout the house again. Tommy jerks like he was shocked. "See you in a bit," he says, sounding unsure of himself. Wilbur lingers to watch as he slips out the back door, crosses the sorry, neglected back porch, and disappears into the suburban maze and out into the night. The rain has slowed to a gentle drizzle, at least, and that will have to be enough.

Shutting and locking the back door, he stops by the kitchen to grab the blackened knife. He shifts on his feet, indecisive, before shoving it down the drain. He'll just have to remember it before starting the garbage disposal.

Then, running a hand through his hair to make it look appropriately bedraggled, he purposefully stumbles to the door and yanks it open.

Whatever combination of people that could have appeared at his doorstep in the middle of the morning, this was not what he was expecting. Phil stands at the forefront of his attention, mouth pulled down into a grim line, with Schlatt quickly retreating to stand behind his shoulder. Despite Phil first drawing his focus, it's Schlatt who holds it the longest.

His face is a mess of blooming bruises and dried blood, clogging around his red nose. There's a cut running down the length of his jaw, open and irritated and oozing. Despite the patchwork that makes up his face, he looks smug, arms crossed over his chest. Just looking at him makes Wilbur's fingers twitch with the urge to do *something*. To strangle him or to split his knuckles on his face or something else similarly violent.

"Wilbur," Phil says, with a look on his face that says he knows exactly what Wilbur was thinking. There are water droplets studding the shoulders of his rain jacket and in his hair, too. They catch the light spilling out from the kitchen in a weird halo effect.

Blinking the tiredness out of his eyes—that he doesn't have to fake—he looks between them, only lingering for a second on Schlatt's disgustingly smug face. If he's going to convince them to leave quickly, then he needs to at least be somewhat compliant. Not enough to raise suspicions but enough to convince them that he's innocent of this particular crime. "Phil?" he says. "What's going on?"

Phil takes in a breath. "There's been an incident. Tommy—" his eyes dart over to the Schlatt, and to the drop of blood he's wiping off his chin. "—attacked Schlatt and fled."

There's no way that's what happened. There had been no blood on his hands, no hint of resistance in him other than the shaky, barely-there determination to live. And there's no way he would've left that out. It's a vital piece of the story.

"Bullshit," Wilbur says before he thinks, eyes narrowing in on Schlatt. Despite the lie, the wounds are still obvious on his face. Something hurt him, and if it wasn't Tommy... Would Schlatt have done it to himself? It seems extreme, but...

Well, Schlatt isn't the same man that he was when Wilbur knew him. Time had twisted him; it had let his bitterness fester into poison.

"*Bullshit*," he says again, doubling down. It's not out of character for him, he thinks, to be so defiant and stuck in his opinions. "That doesn't sound like him at all. Tommy wouldn't do that."

Phil looks like he might believe him as well, or, at the very least, he looks like he doesn't believe Schlatt. Wilbur can work with that; he can sow the seeds of doubt throughout this 'visit' and make Schlatt seem completely unreliable. Hell, he doesn't even have to try very hard! Schlatt already did most of the work.

"That still doesn't have anything to do with why you're here." He glances between them, and then lets his eyes widen in some kind of faux-realization. "What?" he laughs, sharp and bitter and disbelieving. "You think he came running here?" He laughs again. "I'm not sure if you've noticed, but we didn't exactly part on the best terms."

"Yeah, but you've been trying to talk to him ever since. Moping all over the place, stinking up the precinct with your disgusting misery." Schlatt leans over Phil's shoulder to 'grin' at him—he's really just baring his teeth in a challenge, malice glinting in his eyes. "He burnt the bridge but you rebuilt the scaffolding. If he needed somewhere to run, it would be to you."

Okay, he's got a good point. Wilbur's not so consumed by rage and the delicious idea of punching Schlatt in the fucking face that he can't acknowledge that.

"He did say you were becoming sympathetic to the deviants," Phil adds with an apologetic look. "It isn't that much of a stretch to assume that you would take one in, especially one that—" he pauses, looking sorrier by the second. "—you have such a connection to."

"And it isn't that much of a stretch to assume he would go to Tubbo. You know, the leader of a deviant revolution? Where all the other deviants are?" Never mind that Tommy hates Tubbo with a burning passion. Wilbur's pretty sure he's the only one—save for Niki, who won't tattle—that knows that.

"He doesn't know where the deviants are located."

Wilbur raises an eyebrow. "He's an android detective that now answers to nobody. I'm sure, with a few hours of exploration, he could find it."

"What do you expect us to do? Search the whole city?" Phil sighs, massaging the bridge of his nose. "We're just doing what we have to, Wilbur. What we can. You are the most likely person he would go to."

"Our prime suspect," Schlatt butts in with a smug, smarmy smile.

Phil's mouth tightens almost imperceptibly. "Our prime suspect," he agrees after a moment of tired hesitation. "We just need to take a look around to confirm Tommy isn't here, and then we'll be out of your hair."

Schlatt tries to push past him into the house, but Wilbur stands firm, mouth drawn up in a scowl. "Do you have a warrant?" he taunts, looking down at Schlatt. His attempt to breach into his home has left him at an uncomfortable distance from Wilbur's face, but neither of them moves.

When Schlatt speaks next, Wilbur can smell the alcohol on his breath. "Do I need one?"

Part of Wilbur wants to say yes, to deny him access and to allow them more time to craft their cover story. But he knows that denying them will make him look more guilty, despite how unethical it is to pressure a citizen into allowing police into their home without a warrant.

Wilbur knows this. And so does Schlatt, if the sharp, amused glint in his eyes is anything to go off of.

He lets out a quiet, annoyed breath and then steps back, out of the doorway. "Try not to mess anything up," he says as Schlatt slips past him, shoulders bumping. Wilbur winces but does nothing more than rub at the fresh ache.

Schlatt seems to take Wilbur's words as a personal challenge; he heads to the kitchen first, tracking muddy footprints across the carpet and laminate. He yanks open cupboards, knocking old boxes of tea onto the counter. "What, do you expect to find him in the fridge?" he taunts before he can't stop himself. Schlatt looks up at him, scowl etched in his face, and dumps out a box of cereal in retaliation.

"Schlatt," Phil warns as he closes the door shut behind him, wiping off his feet on the doormat. Schlatt gives only an annoyed glance over his shoulder in response, in recognition. He does return to his handling of Wilbur's kitchen—rough, disorganized, disrespectful—and, despite his frown, he does do a cursory check in the fridge.

And on he goes, like a tornado of chaos, tearing through the living room as Phil and Wilbur can only watch, standing side by side. He kicks through the assorted garbage on the ground, he nearly flips the couch onto its side, and he musses up the records to the point of breaking them.

The whole time Wilbur watches, jaw set tight, arms crossed over his chest.

The whole time Schlatt throws out little barbs—comments about the state of his house, pointed looks whenever he knocks over beer bottles or sticky wine glasses—as he goes. He knows that Wilbur can't fight back, not without giving him a reason to suspect Wilbur further, to extend this violation of his home. It's as frustrating as having to sit back, knowing what Schlatt has done, but he does it all the same. He thinks of Tommy the whole time.

Phil and Wilbur follow him as he heads towards the bathroom and only then does Wilbur let the first traces of anything other than resigned annoyance filter onto his face. The sudden terror that grips him—and works its way onto his face—is completely sudden as he remembers a forgotten piece of evidence. Tommy had left his wet clothes in the bathroom when he changed, and Wilbur isn't sure he'll be able to formulate a believable excuse. He stutter-steps, falling behind Phil for only a moment before he catches up, bottom lip trapped between his teeth.

But when Schlatt bursts in, there's nothing on the floor. No soggy, damning clothes. Nothing other than the piles of dirty towels that Wilbur has left. His brow furrows in confusion, but a hesitant relief floods him.

Phil leans towards him, his own furrowed brow matching. "I am sorry about this," he says between them. Wilbur, whose attention is still contained by Schlatt, ripping open the mirror cabinet, only grunts.

"What's this?" Schlatt says, a grin coloring his tone as he leans back. Wilbur freezes, breath stuttering in his chest.

But when Schlatt approaches, it's only with a few spare bags of thirium clenched in his hands.

His breath escapes him in silent relief. "Those are bags of thirium," he says, bluntly, the only defiance he can get away with. "Tommy's handler left them when he got hurt at Stratford tower. I guess Tommy didn't take all of it when you two came to collect his stuff." He shrugs and hopes it looks more nonchalant than he feels.

"So you just happen to have thirium left over?"

"Yes," he deadpans, raising a single eyebrow.

Schlatt jostles the bags, and Wilbur listens to them slosh. "You didn't throw them out when Tommy left? What, expecting him to come back?" He looks triumphant for a man pursuing a dead lead. Wilbur's reluctance to get rid of the spare thirium had nothing to do with any anticipated return and everything to do with his own frustrating sentiments.

"I don't know what you expect me to say," Wilbur says, for once honest in his confusion. "I forgot they were in there. I don't use that cabinet often, so I had no visual reminder."

"Move on, Schlatt," Phil suggests, and Schlatt, with a frustrated noise, does. He continues his inspection, tearing the rest of the bathroom into even more disarray. When he's as satisfied as he's going to be—he even checked the tank of the toilet and was visibly disappointed when he didn't find anything—he storms into Wilbur's bedroom.

Good luck, he thinks, viciously, as he eyes the clothes-covered floor. He'll find nothing in there, and he'll have a hell of a time trying.

"How have you been?" Phil asks, lowly, eyes softened around the corners. With Wilbur's return to his norm after Tommy's leave, Phil had done his own return to norm; he had buried himself in work and done no more checking up than a few concerned texts that went unanswered. Wilbur can't say he's surprised, but he is disappointed. At least Techno—who he was, arguably, on worse terms with—has seen that Wilbur can be 'fixed'. At least he isn't letting Wilbur push him away again.

"I've been." He thinks he sounds a bit cold, but he also thinks it's fair. He's not here as his father; he's here as the police chief, investigating a suspect. He shouldn't be able to have it both ways. "Although I'm not sure I should be talking to you without a lawyer present."

Phil sighs, soft and disappointed. "Wilbur," he says, without any real follow-up. He seems to take the hint, though, and only remains by his side as a silent presence.

After some amount of time, Schlatt stumbles out of his room, looking stormier by the second. He turns his head, catching sight of the one location he has yet to check. "What's this?" he says, taking heavy, slow steps that set Wilbur on edge. "Hiding something?"

Beside him, through the faint brush of their shoulders, he can feel Phil tense up. "Schlatt," Phil warns suddenly, a strange urgency to his voice.

Schlatt ignores him. He reaches out, hand closing around the dull brass doorknob, and he yanks open the door.

Fundy's room is relatively untouched, other than the slight stain on the carpet from his spilled beer. It's still hard to look at, like ripping a scab off only to stare into the angry red wound beneath.

But Wilbur looks at it, eyes scanning the dust-covered shelves, untouched by time and left to preserve his memory. He clenches his jaw until it feels like he's going to break his teeth. He must paint the perfect picture of reluctant, furious restraint.

Despite the glaring, obvious signs of this being a child's bedroom—a dead child's bedroom—Schlatt storms in. Phil and he can only watch—in horror and fury, respectively—as he whirls around like a force of destruction, ripping the bedding from the mattress, strewing blankets and pillows on the floor. The ducks underneath it, yanking storage containers filled with books out from underneath the bed.

Then, not even looking for Tommy but just to be spiteful, he knocks the toys off the shelves. Some of the delicate glass figurines—there are so few of them, since Fundy was a wily child—fall to the ground, shattering despite the carpet there.

Wilbur watches in stony silence. His jaw aches, and his palms ache from the painful pressure of his jagged nails, and his heart aches most of all. But he doesn't say a word.

Schlatt seems to tire himself out then, chest still heaving. His eyes are beady and wet, red-rimmed, and fresh blood drips down his nose. They look at each other, then, an intense, furious stare that only highlights their shattered relationship. How low they've fallen, if this is what they've become. Two alcoholics in a dead child's bedroom, stuffed toys and shards of glass and messed up bedding in the chasm between them.

"What the hell," Phil says, low and dangerous. Wilbur doesn't have to look at him to know just how pissed he is; he's never heard this tone before. He's heard him yelling and angry, he's heard him frustrated and desperately trying to be calm. He's never heard his dad surpass the heat of anger and straight into a blizzard.

"He's hiding him," Schlatt spits out, drunk and angry and so deliriously sure of himself. "There's no way he isn't."

"At this point? That doesn't matter. What matters is that you've been acting completely inappropriately. Nothing about this—" he gestures to the room, at the broken, cherished figurines. "—is okay." Schlatt scoffs and looks away—a mistake when Phil's this angry, surely. Wilbur tenses. "We're leaving."

"Fucking nepotism? Again?" He sneers, and Phil's anger spikes, like a palpable tension in the air. "You're going to take him off the suspect list because he's your son. You motherfuckers —"

"What nepotism you think is occurring has nothing to do with *your* actions." Phil cuts in, and, like a spike of ice through his chest, Schlatt shuts up. "We're leaving now, and when we get back to the station, we're going to have a long conversation about your methods and your future at this precinct." At this, Schlatt opens his mouth, more enraged than cowed. "You misunderstand. I'm not asking. And if you defy my *direct order*, then I'll have you detained for a miscarriage of justice for the inappropriate and frankly *criminal* treatment of this investigation."

It's a stand-off, but eventually, Schlatt relents with a huff and storms out.

Phil lingers only long enough to give him another apologetic look and to say, "I'll deal with him." There's an awkward, stilted moment where he goes to squeeze his shoulder but pulls back at the last second. With a strained smile, he follows after Schlatt.

Giving one last glance at the ruined room, Wilbur lets out a slow breath through still clenched teeth and retreats to the living room without closing the door. He does lock the front door, watching through the crack in the curtains as the car slowly backs out of his driveway. Then, once he's sure they're gone, he returns to wait by the back door.

It takes a while—they have no way of communicating amongst themselves, which will continue to be a problem if Tommy plans to stay—but eventually, when pre-dawn light lines the horizon, he sees Tommy making his way out from the maze. His hair is frozen, frost coating the strands and his shoulders. He walks quickly, but some of the tension leaves his body when he spots Wilbur.

Before he can think better of it, Wilbur opens his arms.

Tommy hesitates, a stutter-step that makes him trip on the slick ground. But as his eyes flicker up to his face, lingering on each feature, he seems to make his decision. He picks up speed and rams into his chest, making Wilbur jerk back and nearly fall.

It's cathartic, though. Tommy is freezing cold, and so is his nose, which finds the warmest spot on his neck to bury in. It's cold and wet, and his breath is shuddering against his skin, ice droplets falling from his eyelashes. He's shivering violently, and Wilbur doesn't hesitate to pull him into the house, locking the door shut behind them.

"I'm sorry," he mumbles in a repeating, whispered mantra into Tommy's icy hair. He runs his hands through it, pulling clumps of ice and slush from it to melt on the floor. It's numbingly cold, burning the tips of his shaking fingers, but he keeps doing it until his cold, wet hair is brushed back from touching his skin.

It's not good. Not right now. Not even close.

But for the first time since Tommy shattered his heart in the evidence locker, he has hope. He thinks it might be okay, eventually.

something akin to justice

Chapter Summary

Wilbur and Tommy walk on eggshells around each other while an unlikely duo investigate Tommy's disappearance

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Thirty-Six: Something Akin to Justice

Phil, for all the heartbreak and mistakes that littered his life like specks hidden in the earth, was fairly happy with it. Every event in his life, no matter how hard, had led up to him adopting his sons. And even if they caused him unbelievable stress—he keeps having to pick premature grays out of his scalp, cursing his sons with every sting of pain—he wouldn't change it for anything.

But there are times—like now, especially—when he feels a bone-deep tiredness. An exhaustion that goes beyond time and space and his all-consuming familial love. Times when Phil regrets every decision that led to his position as captain of this cursed precinct during a fucking prophesied machine uprising. Times when Phil would rather curl up in a hole in the ground than face what his life has become.

This is, undoubtedly, one of those times.

"So let me get this straight," George says, fingers pushed up and under his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose. From beside him, Phil can see the red indents of the nose pads. It's way too early for this, and from the bags underneath his eyes, George knows it, too. "My prized, one-of-a-kind prototype—Cyberlife's solution to the increasing problem of deviancy—is gone. Because *you* lost it."

There's something surprisingly scary about George, for as scrawny as he is. Even though Phil isn't scared of him, this entire situation is shaping up to be truly tiring.

Schlatt, dumb and bruised and still scowling from the thorough chewing out he had received yesterday, misses the danger right in front of him. He turns his head to the side and nearly scoffs. "I didn't lose it! The fucking thing attacked me and ran off when I tried to defend myself."

He's on suspension for now—Phil does want to fire him, but he's reluctantly willing to offer one last chance. A long suspension followed by a thorough rehabilitation program, and, even then, it won't be for months until he's allowed back. If he even is at all. All it takes is one more mistake—one single reason for someone to even just raise their brows at him—and he's out.

The precinct is oddly quiet; news travels fast in a small office, and people—other than Quackity, who keeps glancing up every few seconds—have wisely decided it's none of their business. Their heads are bowed in a mimicry of efficiency.

In the silence, the creak of Schlatt's chair as he shifts, uncomfortable with the attention, is deafening. "Maybe you should have built a less defective machine."

George and Phil create a sort of semi-circle of just two—a last line of defense between Schlatt's derisive glares and the rest of the masses. George moves, placing his hands on his hips, knocking into the bag thrown haphazardly over his shoulder. There is nothing intimidating about this man—with his glasses now slipping down his nose—but still, Phil does not want his ire.

Schlatt, unfortunately, is not as smart.

"Schlatt," Phil intercedes before he can spew more of his condescending, furious attitude. Every sentence is starting to sound more and more like an excuse. "Right now, we are not playing the blame game," he says, as if he's talking to a child. He can't help but allow the bitterness—the ice that has been there since he'd stood by, inert and horrified, as he destroyed the preserved room of his dead grandson—to seep in, to corrupt him and his thinning patience.

He knew Schlatt held an unreasonable grudge against Wilbur, but he'd never thought, for a moment, that it could go that far. To the point that he needed to take out his anger in the most unconventional and inappropriate ways possible.

That moment—his inaction in the face of his own shock and horror, acting like a glue sticking his feet to the ground—was not his proudest moment. Shame seemed to infuse into his blood the longer he lived; he stored a varied collection of 'not his proudest moment's deep in the pit of his gut.

Schlatt still refuses to look at him—he has since he nearly pulled him out of his son's house by the ear—but there's something in the set of his jaw that lets Phil know he has his attention.

"What we *do* need is a complete, concise and *accurate* version of events so we can understand what happened."

For a moment, he thinks Schlatt isn't going to give up whatever stubborn game he's started playing. He looks so impossibly angry, and the harsh bruises—ugly black and blue—that litter his face only make him look worse. Embittered and uncompromising. But, in the end, he seems to soften. His jaw unlatches from its previous, tense position. "Okay," he says, and then he just sounds tired. He just sounds like every other victim Phil's interviewed.

It's not enough to endear him to Phil. It's not nearly enough to make up for the fucked-up actions he witnessed in Wilbur's house.

But it does make a soft, sympathetic breath ease its way out of Phil's chest.

Schlatt's version of events, boiled down to its essentials—without any of the long, flowery language, since Phil is apparently incapable of hiring anyone without a flair for the dramatic—is as follows: Tommy had been acting odd for a while now, but Schlatt ignored it in favor of The Mission™. Last night, he was acting even more different than usual and when Schlatt questioned him on it, Tommy attacked with very little reason. Schlatt fended him off as well as possible, and, when he landed his first solid hit, Tommy fled.

Phil listens with a straight face, hands crossed over his chest. It seems a little farfetched to him, but maybe that's just because he thinks he knows Tommy. Not well, and maybe not accurately—prone to his own biases and distortions of the truth as he is—but he's seen him interact with Wilbur. He's seen how easily and how genuinely he smiles. He's seen him sleepy and curled up on the couch, Wilbur's hand absently carding through his tangled, untamed curls.

He's seen how Wilbur *looks* at him—all soft, fond smiles with tired, hard eyes crinkled around the corners. And while Wilbur may have his flaws and his vices and his own biases, he's always been a good judge of character; Phil's never stopped trusting him on that.

And maybe it is, just a little bit, because of Schlatt's recent misstep—to put it lightly. Maybe it's because Schlatt lost his trust a long time ago, when his and Wilbur's friendship soured so quickly, or maybe it's because it's only now that he knows he can never trust him. Not truly. Not again.

He thinks he might be paranoid, or plain distrustful, but when he sneaks a glance at George, he finds something similar. Not distrust but confusion. His brow scrunched low, his mouth screwed up in something that is and is not a frown. But unlike Phil, he has no trouble voicing it. "That doesn't make any sense," he says, as if it's all plain as day.

"It's what happened."

George turns to the side, spine curving as he digs around in his bag for his tablet. He turns it on, swiping through it for a silent minute before nodding to himself in confirmation. "I'm not... saying that it's not. But his system wasn't nearly unstable enough for deviation." He glances up, gleaning nothing from their stony faces, but taking it as an excuse to gleefully info-dump. "You see, deviancy is only observed when an android's system becomes too unstable to follow commands. It kind of shuts down in a way. A breaking of the part of the programming that accepts commands."

He holds out the tablet, displaying graphs and lines of code and numbers that mean nothing to anyone except for him. "And here, Tommy's system was showing signs of destabilization—" he points to several sharp increases in a line graph. "—but nothing compared to the levels we assume are involved in deviancy."

"You *assume*," Schlatt says flatly. "But you don't know?"

George stills, the temporary excitement slipping off his face. "We haven't been so fortunate as to receive a live deviant."

"Well that's Tommy's fault. We've been holding on to one for far too long." He jerks his chin towards the holding cells, where he knows the deviant—Niki—is held. Understanding seems to dawn on his face, then. "Tommy insisted she was still useful, despite no evidence to support that. I bet that was part of it. Deviants protecting deviants, or whatever."

George shakes his head. "That still doesn't make any sense. With deviancy, there's always some kind of trigger. A sort of... inciting incident, if you will. But you've given no indication of one in your reports. I don't understand how he could deviate, with the information you've given me."

"Well, it's the truth." Schlatt looks defensive—shoulders hunched, body language closed off—but not like he's outright lying.

That's the annoying thing about Schlatt. Even though Phil has his own reasons for doubting, there's nothing in his face or voice or body that gives him away. No tells.

He's an experienced actor, and he's using every ounce of his skill to slide under the radar.

"You must be leaving something out," George insists, head dipped as he looks over the tablet again, zooming in on lines of data too small to read. "Something that didn't seem vital in the moment, or even now." His fingers pinch around the tablet. "Run the night over for me again. And spare no detail."

Face pinched, Schlatt recites his story again. The details and the story are the same, but not without the slight, natural variations of story-telling. He does not add any more details; it seems like there are no more that he remembers.

He reaches the climactic moment, and, in the middle of explaining how Tommy's skin had split, blue blood staining his knuckles, he's interrupted by the sound of shattering glass.

A dozen police officers gathered in a bullpen, most of which are solely attuned to a single conversation, immediately jump into action. The air is filled with a cacophony of guns cocking as everyone turns, fixated on the holding cells, where tempered glass lies in a half-hearted semi-circle around Niki, whose hands are raised not in surrender, but from the act of shattering her cage. Little nicks and cuts cover her face and her arms, but not her hands, which are a stark, bare white.

Nobody breathes. Nobody moves. Niki blinks at them, serene except for the slight shaking of her raised hands.

"What the fuck," somebody—probably Quackity—breathes.

Niki inhales deeply and slowly lowers her arms. She makes no attempt to move, to get out from the sights of a dozen loaded guns. She simply places her hands in her lap and stares up at the trio with baleful eyes. "He's lying, you know."

George gapes. "I'm sorry?"

Phil gestures to a few officers nearest to her. "Bring her over, will you?"

Niki stays stock still as two officers carefully approach her. She doesn't react when they wrap their hands around her biceps and haul her to her feet, and she doesn't react when they drag her over in front of the three of them. The cuts on her face bleed sluggishly, thin tracks of blue that paint her pale skin and trickle down her neck.

All the while, she just stares at them, mainly Schlatt, with dead, unwavering eyes.

Phil pulls over a chair for her and gestures for the officers to let go of her. It might be stupid—it's probably stupid—but he figures that it would be stupid for her to make some kind of move in an office full of officers with itchy-trigger fingers. She seems to realize this as well, since she sinks into the chair after only a moment of hesitation. "Why do you say that?"

She looks between Phil and Schlatt before ultimately deciding on Phil. "Because it's true. And because very little of what he's said is the truth."

Schlatt scoffs, rolling his eyes. Once again, he's missing the subtext. The intricate danger woven into the lines of her synthetic face. The way her head is tilted—hair, limp and blonde, hanging over the sides of her face like a curtain—only exposes a thin sliver of her pale face. It only exposes her nose, the dark slant of her eyes, and her mouth, which is subtly, slowly, curling back.

Unease slams into Phil like a high-speed truck, and the breath wheezes out of his crushed ribs. Before now, he hasn't understood. Not properly. The deviants were portrayed by the media as dangerous—end-of-the-world class dangerous. And Cyberlife certainly seemed to agree, if their efforts to make and send over a prized prototype was any indicator. From George's serious face, it seemed as if life would end as they know it.

And yet, there's almost something sympathetic about them. It's human nature to root for the underdog, he thinks, and their calm, well-spoken leader certainly doesn't hurt. Phil can't help but feel that slight twinge of pity for them every time they pop up on the news.

Looking at Niki now, he understands. He understands the danger lurking beneath the surface of a seemingly placid façade. He understands how well and truly *fucked* they are, if they ever decide to stray from their pacifism.

He just hopes Schlatt does nothing to further incur her wrath, or he fears that even the dozen armed officers at his back won't be enough to help.

Naturally, Schlatt does just that. "Why are you even still here?" he says, dumb and foolish and oblivious to the cliff he's skipping on the edge of. "Shouldn't you be a pile of scrap by now?"

"What's the truth, then?" George cuts in, brows furrowed in contemplation.

Her eyes slide from his to Schlatt's slowly, purposefully. Dead and full of cold, restrained fury. "Tommy would never attack anyone without a reason. Did you give him a reason?"

Schlatt is silent for a moment, amused disbelief coloring his face. "Are we really entertaining this right now?" he asks no one in particular, mouth pulled up into a pathetic little half grin that sends alarm bells ringing in his brain. Phil feels his spin straighten. "Of course you would say that. Since he's your little deviant buddy, huh?"

Niki stares at him. For a long moment, the only motion is her naked hands, which trace nonsensical shapes into the muscle of her thighs. "He's lying to cover up what really happened that night," she continues, as if she hadn't been interrupted at all. "Because if you think Tommy attacked him, then you won't dig any further, and you won't ever find out that he's been hurting Tommy for weeks."

"Bullshit!"

George shakes his head, mouth downturned. "How can you be so sure?"

Niki turns to face him in that slow, eerie way of hers. "He's not subtle about it. Or I guess maybe he just didn't care to hide it in front of me. Who would believe the word of an android over his, right?" She shrugs, uncaring. "But the thing about being an android is that people forget about you, and they let you see a lot." She blinks at Schlatt and although nothing changes in her face, there's something indescribably angry in it. "I've seen Tommy drain thirium bags in seconds. I've seen the dents in his skeleton, the scratches in his skin from glass." Her fingers trail over her bare hand, where she has a few scratches of her own. "I've seen you hit him after feeling your disgusting breath on my face."

His breath feels caught in his chest. No matter how much he may want to, he can't look away from Niki and the anger slowly poisoning her careful apathy.

"And now—" her face scrunches up. "—you're lying about that night and about Tommy attacking you and bolting to cover up the fact—" her voice cracks, as does the budding anger. Melancholic vulnerability creeps in. "—that you killed him."

Heady silence settles over the precinct. It feels unbreakable, as does the stillness that comes with it. Phil watches as her hands shake in her lap, white fingers interlocking as she tries to tame the trembling of her bottom lip.

"If this is true, Schlatt," he says too soon, a warning even without the rest of the sentence."

"If it's true—" George decides to finish for him. His anger rivals Niki's and yet is so different. Where hers is dark and promises nothing but grim misfortune—blunt nails digging into soft eyes, teeth sinking into vulnerable flesh, a knife sliced across an artery—George's is nearly righteous. He promises something akin to justice. The entire might of Cyberlife come to the aid of one scrawny, righteously furious programmer. "—there will be *serious* repercussions. *Legal* repercussions. Property damage fines."

"When did the word of an android mean anything?" Schlatt protests, looking outraged but not quite worried. Phil can't tell if that's because he's innocent or if it's because he believes

nothing will come of this mess.

He's inclined to believe the latter, if only because Schlatt's unchecked arrogance truly is insurmountable.

"We have to check every lead," Phil says instead, pacifying.

"I didn't break the fucking thing! I haven't touched it, save for when it fucking *attacked* me." He gestures to the ugly motley of bruises covering his skin, to the split across the bridge of his nose. "What about me, huh? Does nobody care that it *attacked* me? *I'm* the victim here!"

George slams his hands against the desk, and the entire precinct jumps. "Deviants don't just *deviate*." It's the most emotion Phil's seen from him, and it's impressive as much as it's terrifying. "From the evidence Tommy gathered, there's always some kind of reason, usually to do with the deviant being damaged. So if Tommy deviated—which, already, your word is being called into question—then it's because of some other reason." He crosses his arms over his chest, mouth pressed into a line like he's trying to contain his anger.

And then, like he can't help himself, he throws his hands up. "He's a fucking one-of-a-kind prototype! He took nearly a year to perfect. Over a dozen programmers and specialists worked themselves to the bone on him." He pauses. "I didn't go home that entire year. God!"

"If it's true," Niki says, her soft-spoken voice cutting through the precinct. Her LED is flickering an alarming shade of red, casting her already murderous expression in more dubious lighting. "Then I can only promise to take the place of whatever karma the universe has decided for you."

Schlatt stands up suddenly, looming over Niki. "You want to go, you little bitch?" he snarls. Niki stands as well, quiet and sleek like a cat. The officers at her sides tense with her movement. The entire precinct holds its breath. The air crackles with tension and electricity—the calm before the storm.

"Okay!" Phil says, raising his voice to cut through the tension before it has the chance to bloom into something bigger. "Schlatt. If these accusations are true, there will be serious repercussions."

George curls his lip. "You can't possibly make enough money to cover the damage you've done," he says. "Cyberlife will bury you in fines."

Schlatt straightens. "You're taking the word of a machine over—"

"Not immediately," he says, with a pointed look that quells whatever bloodthirsty, violent energy is still trying to sweep the room. "Innocent until proven guilty and all that jazz." He waves a dismissive hand through the air. "But I can't say we can ignore it. You've proven yourself to be unreliable and prone to... unorthodox methods. We need to investigate this thoroughly."

He sighs, massaging the bridge of his nose, where a headache is already building. "Until further notice, you are not allowed in your apartment. We need to do a full sweep of it. You

can stay with a friend—" he burned all his bridges long ago. "—or we can board you until you're clear, alright?"

Schlatt looks murderous but he wisely—for once since this conversation began—stays silent.

Phil breathes out and rolls his shoulders, already feeling the ache of tensing them. "Right. George, in my office?" George slowly retreats, drawing his hands back from where they pressed against the edge of the desk. His palms are marred by angry red lines. "Quackity?" Said detective glances up, eyebrows raised as his eyes dart back and forth between each member of the spectacle they've created. "Keep an eye on her."

He takes a step back, towards his office, but not before making eye contact with Niki. "And somebody, get her in another fucking cell."

The day after Tommy's sudden reappearance, for lack of anything better to do other than confront Wilbur about all the shit between them—which does not entice him, not one bit—he helps Wilbur clean up Fundy's room. It was a mess in there—the culmination of Wilbur and Schlatt's bitter relationship, according to Wilbur. The shattered ceramic of the few breakables in the room was embedded into the carpet, and every belonging of his long-dead son was strewn about the room.

"Although it was really shitty," Wilbur had explained as he carefully, lovingly, folded the twin comforter into a neat square to be packaged away in a translucent bin. "It was kind of a wake-up call. It was weird to keep this place as some kind of shrine to him. Necessary, yes, but it was always something that made me feel guilty." He had smoothed his hands over the quilt-like material, a sad smile tilting his lips. "A preventative to healing, I think. It's good to finally package this up."

Tommy hadn't said anything. He didn't think he could muster any words that would've meant anything.

But Wilbur wasn't looking for any kind of response, or reassurance. He was just talking—filling the empty space between them that shouldn't have been as awkward as it was. He was doing a lot of that nowadays, it seemed.

"Plus, it'll free up the room," he said next with a meaningful glance and a tentative smile. Tommy wanted to balk at the implications, to shy away from Wilbur's affections that seemed so untouched by Tommy's harsh words. If anything, their separation seemed to jump-start something in him; Wilbur had stopped being coy with his affections.

In the end, he didn't respond. He just ducked his head and gently smashed the stuffed toys into a cardboard box.

The day after that, they worked on moving all the boxes from the garage into the attic. Tommy stood at the base of a ladder, skin retreating from his hands where he gripped the ice-

cold metal. Wilbur stood in the middle of it, ferrying the boxes Tommy handed over into the attic, swearing and complaining about the lack of space and the sheer amount of cobwebs.

"God, you'd think I never clean up here or something," he'd said when he ducked down the final time, messy hair coated in thick webs. Something in Tommy—the perpetual tension that seemed to coil around his gut, like he was always waiting for the other shoe to drop—relaxed at that. He didn't smile—not that he ever did much, these days—but he did reach out to brush them out after only a moment's hesitation.

And life went on, just as it had before, when Tommy felt like he was shattering. When Schlatt first became his partner and he had to face a reality where Wilbur wasn't. Tommy spends most of his time in Fundy's room, legs tucked underneath him, hands held, awkward, in his lap so he doesn't contaminate anything with his touch. He sits there, head tilted back until it meets the wall, and he listens to the sounds of Wilbur shuffling throughout the house.

Sometimes, if he's feeling up to it, he'll leave the room and join Wilbur in whatever activity he's doing. Usually, it's cleaning. Since Tommy's temporary departure from his life, the house has slowly sunk back into disarray, and that's not even to mention the carnage that still litters everything. Tommy helps with this just like he did with Fundy's room; silently.

He sits next to Wilbur and helps him pick pieces of his shattered guitar out of the carpet while Wilbur laughs, nervously, next to him. He helps him shove dirty laundry into the basket to join Tommy's soiled, thirium-stained clothes. He helps ferry dirty laundry into the washing machine in several bulk loads that take up an entire day. He helps gather assorted trash, consolidating it into half a dozen garbage bags that crowd the living room until Wilbur gets up the nerve to brave the icy driveway.

"It was a game," he explains to Tommy one day as he stands at the window, using the back of his hand to push the curtains back. It's snowing, as it so often is lately, and the streets are already covered in a thin layer. "Techno and I used to stand at the window and watch Phil take out the trash in the winter. And we'd always bet on if he would fall or not." He laughs. "Kind of fucked up, now that I think about it, but we got really into it. I remember checking the weather in depth every single day. Techno used to test the quality of Phil's shoes."

And that's how it goes. They clean up the house together in a sort of pseudo-silence, occasionally interspersed with chatter from Wilbur. Tommy doesn't feel up to touching the record player, even when Wilbur puts it back in its place of honor. Untouched and just as he remembers.

It makes him bite his lip every time he sees it, hands clenching in the fabric of Wilbur's ridiculously soft hoodie. He isn't ready to touch it. Distantly, he's not sure if he'll ever be ready. Not truly.

In the off times when he isn't wasting away in a dead kid's room or following Wilbur around the house, he's wandering like a lost ghost. His footsteps are purposefully light, monitored. Something he didn't use to do. He finds his life—again, if it can even be called that—is divided into two sections: Before and After Schlatt.

He hates to think of it like that, though, so he usually tries not to. He hates to think that Schlatt could have such a strong impact on him that he would start classifying actions by this strange new timeline. He hates to know how pleased that would probably make Schlatt, to take up so much brain space.

He tries not to think about it.

Actually, he tries not to think about a lot, these days. The image of the red wall shattering because he fucking breathed on it plays behind his eyes at night. He doesn't think about that, or its implications. He doesn't think about the community house or about Dream. He doesn't think about anything that isn't inside the walls of the house, and he doesn't think about anything that is inside, either.

He doesn't think period, because he has the distinct feeling that nothing good will come of it.

And it doesn't, not when his first real thought in days slams into him in the middle of the night. He wakes with a gasp, Niki's name a breath on his lips as he jolts up, hands grasping for a cool hand and yet finding nothing but the open air.

It's too dark in the room, and, for a moment, he panics, far too used to the comfort of the sliver of moonlight spilling in from the living room windows. Schlatt's living room was completely dark, and, with no light to shake him of it, the thought always gets lodged in his heart when he first wakes up. The gauzy curtains that cover the windows are surprisingly effective at blocking the light, but, if he squints, he can just make out the shape of the moon.

For a while, he simply sits in the darkness, heart hammering against his ribs so hard he's afraid they'll crack. He sits in the darkness, and he watches through the crack in the room's door—his room?—for any sign of movement. He likes to keep it this way, just in case he can catch Wilbur walking to and from the bathroom.

(He can't quite adjust to the thought of something belonging to him. Wilbur has been talking about re-doing the room and each time he remarks on the childish fox stickers lining the walls or the ugly color of the room, he gives Tommy that same, meaningful look. Like he expects him to chime in with suggestions and opinions about his room.

Well, he doesn't have any. He doesn't even have a favorite color. Being an android is hard, but not being one is unthinkable.)

Wilbur isn't walking to or from the bathroom. The house is still and silent, save for Tommy, who shifts until the shabby couch blanket falls from his chest. He reaches out, feeling the cheap material between his fingers.

It's okay, he thinks as his mind races, thoughts spinning as he contemplates how much time Niki has left now that he's gone. Without him, it would make sense to ship her off for deconstruction.

And Tommy still feels like a listless ship—lost and directionless, floating through space and desolate waters without a thought in the world. He still feels like he isn't quite real, like he fell asleep on Schlatt's clean apartment floors and all of this is one big, messed-up dream.

But, if he does nothing else in his pathetic, half-life, he can't allow Niki to be destroyed. He owes her far too much, starting with an apology.

There's not much time to waste, but, as his chest starts to slow and as his breathing grows more steady, he thinks he has a plan.

"This is a terrible plan," Wilbur gripes the next day. Even though Tommy can't see him—from his place tucked in the trunk, buried under the piles of musty blankets Wilbur keeps in here—he knows his hands must be white fists around the steering wheel. "This is a terrible, terrible plan."

"It's gonna work," Tommy protests, voice muffled by the tan fabric obscuring his face. If he focuses, he can just make out a patch of flickering sunlight on the ground, through the sliver where the blanket is too short to touch the floor.

"No, it is not. We're gonna get caught, and then you—" he cuts off abruptly, with a sharp intake of air. "We're gonna get caught."

"First of all, who the fuck is going to check your car during the day? Second—"

"Schlatt!" Tommy flinches a little, both at the name and at how loud—and high-pitched—Wilbur's voice is. He's glad Wilbur can't see him right now. His former partner—friend?—has taken to watching him like a hawk, plastering on comforting smiles whenever he thinks Tommy might be seconds away from breaking. It's as frustrating as it is endearing, but it just makes Tommy feel more broken than he already is. "Do you even need to ask?"

"Second of all—" Tommy continues as if he hasn't been interrupted at all—a desperate bid for the normalcy they once shared. It's a pitiful attempt, this sudden joviality of his, but thankfully, Wilbur seems to take it for what it is. "I'm hidden well. Nobody will even see me."

There's a moment of silence. Tommy doesn't fool himself into thinking that he's brought Wilbur around, but he does think, just possibly, that Wilbur has decided to leave it at that.

But, of course, that was being too generous.

"This doesn't make sense. Why am I even there in the first place? I'm suspended from work. If anyone looks up to see me sat in the parking lot, it's going to be so suspicious."

"It's fine. You can just lie and say that you're worried about me and wondering if there are any updates. Or we could stop by somewhere and get lunch for Phil or Techno. Yeah, wait, go get something for Techno, and then, because it's clearly super suspicious, you cave and admit you want to know if there's any information on me." The car bumps, sending Tommy's shoulder crashing into the seats behind him. "Then it will just seem like you wanted to know information. Boom, I'm a genius."

"Sure," Wilbur says, but even then, it lacks its usual playful bite. "I just don't think this is going to go well. What do you do if someone catches on? What if someone spots you? You aren't going to be able to leave quickly, and you won't be able to get some kind of message to me. This seems like a recipe for disaster."

The car turns, a couple streets earlier than needed, on the internal map Tommy has pulled up in the corner of his vision. "Wilbur, seriously," he says, despite the way his heart is pounding just at the thought of coming face-to-face with Schlatt again. "It's going to be fine. If it bothers you that much, leave the car unlocked. Then I can spring out and make a run for it."

"Leave the car unlocked, he says." Wilbur scoffs but a second turn and their subsequent location stops him from being able to respond. He rolls down the window and orders food for Techno. It's only when they've pulled into the line of customers and the window is rolled up that he can continue. "Yeah, I'm definitely going to leave it unlocked so somebody can snoop around and catch you." He scoffs again. "That might be even worse."

If he wasn't tucked away in the back of the trunk, blankets piled over him and body held unnaturally still to avoid disturbing the illusion, he probably would've thrown his hands up comically. Sometimes, that's all that's needed—a little drama for drama's sake. "Alright, then don't do that. Worst case scenario, I have to scramble over the back seats and exit out one of the main doors."

"That is the worst case scenario."

"Yeah, that's why I said it."

"You—" Wilbur clearly wants to go on, but he's stopped by the sound of his window rolling down. He greets whatever poor teenager is working with the bare minimum enthusiasm, pays the kid, and pulls up to the second window to wait. "You're insufferable, you know," he says in that tone that indicates he's not telling the truth.

"Insufferable and proud of it," he quips, because he imagines that's what he would've probably said Before Schlatt.

They don't talk for the rest of the ride. Wilbur gets his food from the second window and drives off, back on track towards their mission. He turns on the radio—loud enough to be heard above the sound of tires on concrete, but not too loud so that he'll miss it if Tommy speaks again, or so he assumes is the intent. Tommy watches the patch of sunlight flicker in the shadows of trees and buildings, and, when he grows too claustrophobic, he reaches out. He lets his fingers rest in the patch, fingernails illuminated by the light.

Eventually, the music stops, and the only sound in the car is Wilbur's breathing. It sounds abnormally loud, but Tommy can't tell if it's because of his hyperactive hearing or because it really is that loud. Without needing the map, he can tell when they get close just by the hitching and reactions in Wilbur's breath alone.

The car slows to a stop not long after. Wilbur puts it in park, but doesn't take the key out of the ignition yet. "Are you sure about this?" he asks, one last time, sounding serious.

And well, he's not. He's not sure about anything anymore, not since the tasks on his to-do list went blank. Not since he lost his mission when that red wall shattered in front of his very eyes.

"Of course I am," he says, infusing it with whatever faux confidence he can muster up. "It's going to be fine."

Wilbur draws in a soft breath. "Alright. If you say—*shit. Shit.*" Tommy tenses but listens at the tell-tale sign of the window rolling down. And then, "Hey Techno!"

Shit indeed. The plan is already off-kilter, since Wilbur didn't even make it into the building.

Tommy tries to imagine where Techno's standing around the car based on the intimidating aura alone. He gives up after about half a second when it doesn't work, and when he realizes that this alternation in his plan may cut things short. He needs to take advantage of whatever time they have.

He lets the sounds of conversations fade into the background—a comforting back and forth of Wilbur's cheery 'I'm-totally-bullshitting-you-but-you'll-never-know' voice and Techno's dull monotone. Instead, he squeezes his eyes shut until the image of the patch of sun disappears. Until everything disappears except his form, held in suspense in the darkness, and the general location of the precinct.

He pictures it, then. Its familiar lobby with its android receptionist, the familiar walk through the glass doors and into the unruly bullpen. Quackity and Charlie lingering by their desks, body language mirrored as much as the twin grins on their faces. The complex maze of desks, the general noise of conversations, the dark floors. Tommy walks through it in his mind, steps light and unechoing as he weaves through the desks. He follows the right wall until he comes upon the holding cells.

When he stops outside the cell he knows holds Niki, he can't see her. He's looking only at an empty cell, but when he presses his hand flat against the glass, he can feel her. In the vision—his mind's eyes—he closes his eyes as well. No sensory input mars the scene, save for the familiar buzzing of Niki's system against his hand. He breathes the sensation in, letting himself feel it and nothing else. And then—when he can hear it, taste it, see it—he speaks.

Niki.

He can feel her surprise, the way she must jump inside the precinct. *Tommy?*

He smiles, some of a previously unrealized tension slipping from his shoulders. *Hi.*

Relief bleeds into the connection, heady and so overwhelming it makes him dizzy. *I thought you were dead.* Her voice, strong and clear in his mind, like a telephone wired directly into his brain, wavers. *You asshole. I thought he killed you.*

Of all the things, he didn't think that would be her main concern. How low his opinion of her, if he thought her main concern would be herself and her preservation. *He tried,* he admits, in a rare show of honesty. He hasn't felt very honest lately. *But I'm fine.* He hesitates, allowing

his awareness of the real world to filter back in. He can hear Techno and Wilbur talking still. He can hear the rustle of the fast food bag as Wilbur must present it, proudly. *I'm with Wilbur.*

Wilbur? Is he... where are you two?

We're in the parking lot. Wilbur... well, the plan was that he was supposed to be inside, drawing attention away from the car that I'm currently in the trunk of, but things have sort of... ah... derailed a bit. He can feel her concern, and he sucks in a breath. *It's fine! It's all good. All that matters is that I'm close enough to get in contact with you.*

Warm, bubbly affection coats his mind. *I'm glad you're alright.*

Is he? Stored away in the back of Wilbur's car, a defective machine with no orders anymore. Is this really how you classify 'alright'?

Instead of pondering any further, he centers himself on the task. *I'm glad you're alright, too. I was afraid that with me gone, they'd be chomping at the bit to send you off.*

Schlatt is, she answers honestly. It only occurs to him, as he's in the middle of an open wince, that the connection must go both ways. The thought—his sudden inability to hide whatever maelstrom is going on inside his head—quickens his pulse. *But it seems no one trusts him anymore. And George is pretty pissed at the thought that he might've hurt you.*

George is there? Tommy blinks. *Why would they think that Schlatt hurt me?* There's a long, silent pause. It allows the real world to filter back in long enough for Tommy to catch bits of Wilbur's conversation. He's firmly in the middle of the 'subtle but not very well done hinting for information' stage. *Niki?*

I thought you were dead. Her defensiveness rakes along the sides of his arms, forming goosebumps in their wake. *I may have... created a scene.*

A scene?

I accidentally shattered the glass of my cell.

Jesus. It takes everything in him not to swear aloud, both at the severity of the situation and the unexpected pride that warms his gut. *Well, then. I'm glad I'm here. We'll need to get you out of there as soon as possible.*

A feeling so overwhelming chokes him, consuming his brain until he can no longer attempt to sort it out. *You're here to... free me?*

Oh.

Of course I am. I promised I would help, didn't I? When we first met?

Niki's soft huff of laughter tickles his ears. *I thought we both knew you were lying.* He wants to protest, but it's kind of true, so he lets it slide. *What's the plan?*

Tommy hesitates for a moment, although he's sure she can feel his unease. In the end, he caves and confesses that he doesn't exactly have one. It was the point of this meeting, after all. It only takes her a second before she comes alive, and only one more before they're brainstorming together, comparing both their knowledge of the precinct—Tommy's—and of escape plans—Niki's.

Thankfully, Niki has had a long time to think on it. She already has several half-formed plans and, with Tommy's knowledge of the precinct and its inhabitants, it isn't long before they've come up with a rough draft.

They're putting the final touches on their plan when the trunk of the car suddenly pulls open. Tommy sucks in a breath and pulls his fingers back, which were still lounging in the brief patch of sun. Cold air rushes inside the car, slipping in the crack and caressing his skin. "What are you doing?" Wilbur asks, although his pure panic bleeds into the question too much.

"I think I left my bag in here last time," Techno says, his voice far too close for comfort. Every muscle in his body locks up, despite that the urge to run is consuming his thoughts. "I'll just—" He can feel the heat radiating off of Techno's hand from where it hovers above his flattened body. He tenses, sure that the blankets are going to be ripped from him any second now. But then, his hand diverts paths with a triumphant sound, and something from behind him is unwedged. "Here it is."

Wilbur's breath of relief sounds far too loud to his ears. Tommy can only hope it's because of his syntenic ears. "I should get going," he says, sounding antsy as the trunk slams again with a resounding boom. "Thank you, for humoring me."

Niki, he says, sounding softer in his own head. *I think we're leaving now.*

When she responds, it's with a lonely sort of desperation. *So soon?*

Wilbur's too antsy with us this close to the precinct. Wilbur finishes with his perfunctory goodbyes, and then the door slams again, and Wilbur locks the car hastily. *But we'll be back. I promise.*

The car lurches forward. Tommy squeezes his eyes shut tighter, as if that will preserve Niki's voice in his head. When she speaks again, she already sounds faded and staticky. *Okay. I trust you, this time.*

And with that, the connection is severed.

"Jesus," Wilbur breathes as they slowly drive away, turning out of the parking lot for the precinct and back onto the main road. It isn't until they've reached the highway that he relaxes a little, his breathing evening out.

Tommy, drunk on the success of his plan, the heady feeling of adrenaline, and the joy of speaking to Niki, throws the blankets off and climbs over the back seat. "Alright," he says, smiling properly for the first time in what feels like years. "We've got another plan."

Wilbur groans, using their pause at a stop light to slam his forehead against the steering wheel. The horn honks, brief and comedic. "Right. Cause your last one turned out *so well*."

"Hey, we didn't get caught!"

Wilbur breathes out, slow and steady. When he meets Tommy's eyes, he's smiling as well, no matter how strained. "No. That we did not.

"What are we hoping to find here?" Phil asks as he braces himself with a hand tightened around the edge of the door.

George has already let himself into the apartment with somewhat-reluctant permission from its owner, who should be safely tucked away in a hotel room, by now, where he can't interfere with this internal investigation. His glasses sit precariously on the bridge of his nose, speckled with the snowflakes that had rained down on them on the brief walk from Phil's car to the front lobby.

It's a strange sort of acquaintanceship they've struck up—one built only on a mutual beneficence, and a shared association with Tommy—but it hasn't been unpleasant. Far from it, actually. Phil finds that, especially in a situation like this, he appreciates George's bluntness, his single-minded focus on the task. Plus, for such a spindly-armed geek, he's surprisingly intimidating when he sets his hands on his hips.

He's got a UV flashlight clenched in the hand hanging by his hip, and although it isn't on yet, he still wields it like it is, pointing at objects of interest without any real commitment.

"I didn't think I'd have to explain the concept of searching for evidence," he quips in a morose deadpan. Phil suppresses a frustrated sigh and follows him after a thankful nod to the landlord, who let them in.

Schlatt's apartment is unsurprisingly boring. It is a house without being a home; the dwelling of a man without friends or family or any desire to have a warm, comfortable place to return to. It's clean and modern—black and white splashed throughout the space more frequently than any color. A couch sits in the middle of the living room, a skinny hallway leads to what must be a bedroom, etc, etc.

It is, well and truly, like every other modern apartment. It is nothing special, save for the crumpled heap shoved against the wall near the open door of the bathroom. It's so horribly out of place in an apartment otherwise dictated by order that Phil instantly knows it must belong to Tommy. The pile of wrinkled clothes, what must be an android charger still plugged into the wall.

George wanders into the center of the room and does a slow circle in place. He seems to catch onto the fact that Phil refuses to engage with his attempts at humor, because he continues. "We're looking for any evidence to support or refute the deviant's claim. To either

implicate or absolve your detective in any destruction of company property, or whatever you want to call it."

He follows the depressions in the carpet—a natural consequence of owning plush carpet and apparently deciding to trample on it all the time. Meanwhile, Phil wanders over to the pile and crouches down.

"The best way is probably going to be some kind of thirium trail. If the deviant is to be believed, your detective has drawn blood. That should have left some kind of mark." George holds up the UV light where Phil can see it and pats its side, almost affectionately. "Thirium disappears after a few hours, but only to the naked eye. This will spot it." He lowers it, head swiveling around, although Phil can't begin to guess what he's looking for.

"And if we find the thirium?"

The clothes are strewn along the edge of the wall in a way that strikes Phil as odd. He refiles through it carefully, gloved hands sorting through them. It's an odd collection, although just from first glance, he spots a few of Wilbur's clothes; old t-shirts, a pair of sweatpants, a dress shirt. He sets them back down before he has a chance to consider that further.

"Well, depending on how damning it is..." George meets his eyes and shrugs.

His hand trails up from the pile to the wall. A couple feet above the pile, there are microscopic shards of glass embedded.

Schlatt had mentioned that he'd been drinking a beer when Tommy attacked. It isn't out of the realm of possibility that the bottle had shattered in the scuffle, but something about the placement of it is odd. His fingers trail over them, minding the thin latex that separates his fingers from the sharp edges. His DNA from 'contaminating' the scene, even if it doesn't really matter.

This investigation is unofficial at best, and, even then, they won't be needing any fingerprints. There won't be any, aside from Schlatt's, which aren't unusual considering the location.

"Depending on how damning it is," he continues for George, picking up the legal slack. "With Niki's accusation and your reports on Tommy, it could serve as probable cause. We could bring Schlatt in for questioning."

Phil sits back on his heels and glances at George. With an unspoken word passing between them, George holds up the UV light. He flicks it on, and a large circle of purple light appears on the far wall. It highlights the kitchen and, as George slowly moves it, it catches on all the missed bacteria surrounding the sink and flecked on the walls.

It's more than a little telling, in that way—an exposure of the secrets that Schlatt tried to clean away, even if it's something as mundane as kitchen germs.

When the entire kitchen is found to be clean save for the hidden dirt, George methodically bathes the rest of the apartment in that luminescent light. It scans over the TV screen and across the ceiling, over the couch, down the hallway—floor and walls—and across the living

room floor. He scans the front door and the walls and yet, it reveals nothing. Phil's beginning to suspect that they'll find nothing. After all, who could trust a deviant's word?

George sighs, turning on his heel to direct the beam towards one of the only untouched spots—Tommy's little nest. When it hits, illuminating the space right in front of Phil, they both suck in sharp breaths that whistle through their teeth.

The entire wall is splattered in specks of blue. The shards of glass catch in the light, their deadly edges lined with thirium. But the worst part is what's under Phil's feet, what's under his very knees.

The floor is soaked with long-dried thirium. It's covered in puddles of invisible stain that create a marred, jagged semi-circle around a pile of clothes that is, much to their horror, unclean as well. In some spots, Phil swears he can see the faint outline of limbs, as if Tommy had only been able to lie in the lake of his own blood and let it dry around his prone body.

Phil can't even imagine how much Tommy would have to bleed to create the visual effects—luminescent and downright painful to look at, for more than one reason. How many hits had it taken? How many smashed bottles? How many shards of glass shredded through his skin?

Phil turns away from it, jaw set. His eyes find George's face.

He's used to seeing him grumpy and untouchable—it's his default state, at this point—and now, with the introduction of an annoyance, he's seen George look pissed.

But that? Yelling at Schlatt in the confined space of an office, hands pressed against his desk until they turned white with the strain?

That was nothing compared to what he sees now.

Chapter End Notes

Do I really like George as a character that much? No. Am I going to make him a force to reckon with in this fic? Of course I am. Mans didn't spend all his waking hours working on that android just for some guy with anger issues to destroy it >:(

Also, if you guys wanted to help me out a fuck ton, I need to complete a research project for a personality psychology class, and have created this survey (<https://forms.gle/3ssXUeBdpYWmTNyJ8>). It's completely anonymous, and it would help me out so much if you guys would take it.

Obviously, no pressure, it's a free country and all that :)

inside my own dream

Chapter Summary

"Maybe I'll find mine's a nightmare, but I don't even care. I just want to live inside my own dream."

Chapter Notes

This chapter (20K words) beats out my previous longest chapter (18K words). Take your time with it, get a drink of water, all that stuff. Feel free to not read it one sitting as well, although I know most of you animals probably will /lh

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Inside My Own Dream

"Wil, over here!"

Wilbur shoves his hands deep within his pockets, jagged fingernails brushing against the inner lining of his coat. There are a few crumbs in there that get caught under his nails, and he suppresses a grimace.

It's the shittiest kind of weather; cold and rainy but with a frozen ground that leads to slick sidewalks and grimy mush lining the streets. He makes his way over from his haphazardly parked car, careful over the damp roads, and towards Quackity and Charlie. They're huddled together in the entranceway of Jimmy's bar. It's an unfortunate meeting spot—not only because of his enmity for Jimmy due to his anti-android sentiments and treatment of Tommy, but also because of his on-and-off-again sobriety. However, it's the only one this late into the night, and, right now, Wilbur really needs to be seen by other people.

All part of the supposed plan. One that Tommy and Niki refuse to let him in on—something about plausible deniability.

"Hey," he greets as he slows his awkward, poor-weather jog. He lands a hard hand on Q's shoulder and clasps forearms with Charlie. "Long time no see."

Quackity grins. The sight of it alone soothes the tension that's been growing inside him all night. God, he's missed these two. "Well if it isn't Mr. Wilbur Soot." He bumps his shoulder

into Wilbur's before ducking back under the alcove, pulling the door wide open. Wilbur catches a glimpse of that same anti-android sign, although it has a different weight to it now. He considers, briefly, ripping it off and fucking the consequences, but he figures it will only draw attention to him in the long run.

Quackity and Charlie lead him through the dim bar. It's filled with the dull sound of conversations and the low rock music Jimmy plays from an obnoxiously bright, 80s jukebox. Jimmy himself is behind the bar, wiping out the inside of a glass like every single bartender cliché ever. He looks up at their entrance and scowls, although his companions ignore him. Instead, they slide into a booth in the middle of the bar, back enough to avoid the blasts of fridge air but upfront enough to be away from the bathrooms—they're never as clean as they should be.

Charlie rounds up their drink orders; Wilbur orders a soda from the forgotten fountain (ignored in favor of some of the more adult drinks) and frowns at Q's raised brow. "Trying for sobriety again?"

For anyone else, those would be fighting words. But Q says it in that disarming way of his that has Wilbur only letting out a sigh, leaning into the crutch of his hand. The tables are slightly sticky—damp with the humidity in the room and the dozens of spilled drinks that had dried unencumbered.

God, this place really is a shithole. He doesn't know why he gave them his patronage for so long without complaint. "Trying being the keyword."

Quackity huffs a laugh, kicks his shin lightly from across the booth, and settles back in his seat. They continue to exchange light, joking conversation until Charlie returns with two beers and his soda. Wilbur nurses his less than happily, watching with barely concealed jealousy as they sip theirs.

It's nice to see them, especially since he's been pulling away these last few weeks. They're some of the only other people he's talked to after his temporary suspension, and it's good, even if can't let slip any mention of Tommy.

It's not that he doesn't trust them—*god*, does he trust them—but Wilbur isn't taking any chances, not with Tommy's safety. Not when they're in an anti-android bar with listening ears surrounding them in a sea of rosy cheeks and glazed eyes. Lucky bastards.

It pains him to keep it from them, especially when he can see the faint cracks in Quackity's jovial mask—the concern that defaults his expression any time he isn't performing for them—and the manifestation of Charlie's worry in the torn-up label on his beer.

But now, when it's so fresh and the investigation is still at the forefront of everyone's mind, he just can risk it.

Thankfully, they don't leave many gaps in the conversation. Quackity willingly—and enthusiastically—shares what he's missed, going into detail on even the smallest office gossip: George's control over the investigation, Schlatt's general shittiness, even the newest officer's massive professional—and maybe personal—crush on Techno, which makes Wilbur

lose his shit and snort soda through his nose. He even shares things other than petty drama and office politics, like Charlie's new impression or the bit they've been playing with.

"It was insane," Q says as he finishes up his dramatic retelling of the massive confrontation between Schlatt, Phil, and George, and of how Niki shattered *literal bulletproof glass* with nothing more than her *fists*. "She's fucking scary, but in a good way. I mean, honestly, she probably wouldn't think twice about killing me if I got in her way, but I like that about her." He nods decisively. "She's badass."

Wilbur tries not to smile wider than is appropriate for Quackity's infectious energy; he tries not to let his incredible fondness for her leak in. It's not like they don't know, but it definitely won't help when... certain events that are probably occurring right at this moment eventually come to light. He knows Q and Charlie would never snitch on him—let alone that they've been pro-android longer than he has—but it's easier to leave them out of everything.

Fewer witnesses to accidentally spill the beans and fewer people jailed if shit eventually hits the fan.

In return, Wilbur shares what he can. He fills them in on the whole sordid thing with Schlatt, leaving nothing out about his visit even when the memory makes him grimace.

"You're fucking kidding me!" Quackity exclaims more than once before he can even finish, looking beyond furious on his behalf. It's comforting and warming, and Wilbur has to bury his too-soft smile—that's a little too big a show of vulnerability for his comfort—by taking a sip. Quackity stands, fury tensing his jaw, curling his hands into fists. "Up, Charlie. We've got an ass to kick."

Wilbur easily catches him around the wrist, feeling light with the laughter that leaves him. He always forgets how easy it is to be around them, how *good* they are at mitigating any tension, filling silences, easing negative moods with easy banter, and playing a pair of fools. It feels *good* to be here, even if it's a bar that he no longer loves, crowding the corner booth, sticky table, and harsh LED lights exacerbating the pulsing behind his eyes.

It feels so good to be with his friends. He always forgets it, and he'll likely forget it in an hour or two, when the high of successful socialization has worn off and he's fallen back into the sickly hands of his self-isolation. For now, it's nice to revel in their concern and half-serious threats.

A single look is enough to get Charlie to sit back down. He was still only half out of his seat, uncertainty written over his sweet face. Quackity is a different story.

"Sit down," he says to Q, who is still standing despite the press Wilbur puts into his fingertips, pressing white spots into his skin. He wavers, jaw working in actual anger, before the expression melts off his face. He drops back into his seat like a dead weight. "Is it beyond shitty? Yeah."

"Beyond shitty, he says," Quackity scoffs. "That's an understatement."

"But—" he continues without faltering. "That's life. He'll probably get suspended for being an asshole, and I'll be back in, like, a week. And everything will be fine."

Quackity's face, for a brief shining moment—the side of his face lit up with the obnoxiously bright LEDs Jimmy keeps behind the bar—is unusually serious, and Wilbur is violently reminded of one of the many reasons he's been avoiding him, as of late. He's too smart for his own good, that Big Q, and Wilbur has no doubt that he already harbors his own suspicions. There's no way he hasn't figured out—or at least suspects—that Wilbur is hiding Tommy. But there's no way for either of them to confirm.

Although Wilbur trusts him—*of course he does*; Quackity was his first real friend in years, and he cared about Tommy way before Wilbur pulled his head out of his own ass—he still can't confirm anything. He can't risk being overheard or Charlie making a well-meaning slip, or—or *anything*.

And Quackity, as perceptive as he is, is too smart and too afraid to ask, in fear of confirmation that Tommy is *not* with him.

So there's this odd tension between them—words unspoken and unasked but still lingering. Quackity won't ask, and Wilbur won't allude more than a pointed look that could mean *literally anything*, and Charlie keeps picking at the label, littering the table with scraps of torn, balled-up paper.

Wilbur tries for a smile, anyway, and cracks a joke that slowly has them relaxing back into the conversation.

Unfortunately, things will have to remain unsaid, at least for now. He just hopes that, on Niki and Tommy's end, nothing has gone to shit.

Nothing has gone to shit. It's actually insane.

Tommy's luck is *never* this good, and yet, phase one went without a single hitch. The standard AX200 supplied by a local cleaning company because of a contract with the precinct—named John, based on the letters sown in the jumpsuit Tommy is currently wearing—came exactly on time, as he did every single night. Tommy had tracked out his route days in advance; he waited in an alley only a block off from the precinct, pressed against the brick wall of a tall building whose shadow hid him perfectly.

John had passed, at the same time he always did, and Tommy lunged out, whispering apologies as John didn't even try to fight back. Tommy's hands shook with adrenaline, pressing over his mouth and against John's LED. It only took a second for their systems to slot together, and for Tommy to—*temporarily*—disable him.

Then, he dragged his limp body back behind the dumpster and—scowling viciously at the next step—clinically and efficiently swapped their clothes.

He had tugged the hat down low over his mess of curls, taking the time to shove his head into the hat. Tommy looked nothing like the AX200 model, but his hair was the most obvious difference. Although, honestly, the whole plan kind of hinges on humanity's complete disregard for androids.

The lobby is empty when Tommy enters, strolling confidently but not cockily. He keeps his head ducked down just enough to avoid the cameras but up enough that it looks natural and not suspicious, the brim of the hat casting shadows over any identifying features. He spares a slight nod towards the receptionist as he passes by the desk. His breath catches in his throat when he realizes his mistake.

John—a normal android—probably wouldn't do that. Tommy—a maybe-not normal android, who had an almost acquaintanceship with her—would and *had*, every time he and Wilbur had walked into work.

It takes every ounce of self-control not to bolt immediately at the slip-up, to keep his posture loose and his gait steady. He sees recognition in her eyes, but, even more than that, there's a *knowing gleam*. He looks at her, and he doesn't see the blank look of an obedient android. The corners of her lips tilt up in the slightest acknowledgment, and Tommy finds himself responding in kind.

On the way towards the main bullpen, he stops by the janitor's closet, retrieving the cart stashed within. He strolls along the familiar pathways between the labyrinth of desks and the wall, noting the officers hunched over their desks. He almost stutter-steps, a swear nearly tipping off his tongue when he notices that Techno is among their tired ranks.

Well, *shit*. That definitely complicates things.

Phase one complete. No hiccups yet, he says into the mental connection that effortlessly snaps into place. Tommy notes each camera he walks past, staring into their blinking red lights. His fingers tighten around the handle of the cart. *But I didn't plan for Techno to stay late. That could be a problem.*

He counts the cells as he passes the many empty ones preceding Niki's, already nudging a bottle of cleaner closer and closer towards the edge of the cart.

We'll deal with it when it becomes a problem. Niki's voice is steady and clear, which helps him shove down the last of his nerves. *No reason to count your chickens before they hatch.*

Tommy nearly frowns, stops himself at the last second, and then sends that feeling of faint disapproval down their mental connection. *I don't think that saying applies in this case.*

It does. I've made it so.

He huffs, just as the rattling of the cart proves too much. The bottle of cleaner falls onto the floor right in front of Niki's cell.

Several officers look up at the noise, but go back to their work quickly when they recognize the familiar coveralls of a janitor android. Only Techno's gaze lingers for a few more

agonizing seconds before retreating.

Tommy stops the cart, positioning it perfectly in front of the scanner. When he bends down to pick the bottle up, he leans his arm on the wall for support; his bare hand *coincidentally* lands on the hand scanner. He was never given access to unlock it—access that surely would've been removed when he disappeared—but that doesn't matter. He fumbles for the bottle under the stare of Niki's barely cracked-open eyes.

She's faking stasis, and she's faking it well. Her back is pressed against the wall, legs crossed and head tipped back. Her eyes quickly slide shut again, but they look loose and natural. Her LED spins a convincing yellow.

It takes an embarrassingly quick amount of time to hack the lock, and when Tommy stands up, picking up the bottle and making eye contact with an impassive Niki, it's only been a few, inconspicuous seconds. Tommy sets the bottle back in its place on the cart and carries on like nothing happened. When he reaches the kitchen, he heads inside and meticulously cleans it despite his pounding heart. He wipes down the familiar countertops, cleans out old food from the fridge, and scrubs the inside of mugs crusted with old coffee.

He takes note of the TV screen as he passes, playing some channel on a low volume. Then, he continues his steady rounds around the office, straightening up unoccupied desks and tossing trash into the built-in garbage can on the cart. He makes sure to duck his head a little anytime he has to pass Techno.

This is the most nerve-wracking part of the whole operation, and, with every single second, he can feel his discovery inching closer. He keeps moving at that steady pace, making sure to slowly replace each camera feed with a loop as he goes. He figures it will be pretty obvious who helped Niki escape, even without John's eventual testimony. It never hurts to be cautious, though, even if he doesn't think they have someone watching the live feed.

Tommy sweeps through the entire office, and only after he straightens up Phil's office—pausing at the family pictures still decorating the shelves and allowing a moment to run his thumb over Wilbur's young, gap-toothed smile—does he breathe out. *Alright. Phrase Three is a go.*

From across the office, he watches Niki sit up a little straighter. She's still in her pretend stasis but there's a rigidity to her spine that wasn't there before.

Tommy walks back through the walkway, keeping close to the wall. As he nears Niki's cell, he connects to the TV, turning up the volume to something truly ear-shattering. The theme song to some gameshow blasts through the precinct, startling some of the officers into drawing their guns.

"What the fuck?" one of them says, warily tucking his gun away to approach the kitchen. As he nears, he has to press his hands flat against his ears. "Fuck, it's the TV. Someone help me turn this thing off."

Considering the remote has long since been lost to time, Tommy figures they aren't going to have a whole lot of luck. He watches out of the corner of his eye as, one by one, the other

officers gravitate towards the commotion.

All except Techno.

Shit. Shit. Fuck, Tommy repeats like a mantra in his head, only realizing he sent it through the link when Niki's neutral mask slips for a second. His mind is whirring, trying to figure out how to *fix this*.

"Hey, Craft!" Techno makes an annoyed noise in response. "Get in here. We can't figure this shit out!"

There's a single wavering moment. A moment where Tommy is so hopeful and so fearful at the same time, thanking RA9 for this lucky opportunity and waiting for the moment that Techno decides not to help out his coworkers.

Thankfully, he caves after a groan, pushing himself up. As soon as he's out of sight, it's chaos. Niki yanks the door open, gritting her teeth as she throws herself—with Tommy's help—over the lip of the trash can and straight into it. Tommy moves fast, covering her head with empty trash bags. When none of her bright blonde hair sticks out, he pushes the cart forward. Disregarding his slow pace now that no one is watching them, he rolls towards the janitor's closet like a bat out of hell.

As soon as the door shuts behind them, they explode back into motion.

Niki springs up, panting, and scrambles out. A few candy bar wrappers and wadded tissues stick to her, to her disgust, but there's nothing to be done about it right now. Tommy shoves the cart to the side, and Niki stands before a massive shelf, regarding the water-stained tiles with her head tilted back. *It's here, right?*

Tommy glances up and compares the blueprints for the precinct. *Yep, here. There should be a vent big enough for us to get through. One that opens up directly into the dust system.*

Without wasting time, Tommy saddles up to her side and laces his fingers together. She places her foot on the step he creates, one hand gripping his shoulder for balance while the other pushes the ceiling tile up and to the side. It slides away to reveal the vent. Tommy wordlessly hands over a screwdriver from the toolbox on the cart, and Niki gets to work.

It's quiet and tense, their breaths strained and repressed. Her foot digs into his palms and her weight strains his interlocking fingers, but Tommy stays steady despite the new shaking of his tensed shoulders. One screw drops to the ground, and it sounds deadly loud despite the noise of panicked yelling and blaring TV. The second follows its brother quickly, and then Niki is removing the vent, tucking it into the space between the duct and the ceiling tiles. She grips the edges of the duct with white fingers and hauls up at the same time Tommy *lifts*.

She jerks for a second before pulling herself up and into the vent.

Tommy lets out a sigh of relief as she disappears from view, but it gets caught in his throat when there's an ominous, achingly familiar click behind him. He raises his hands he can even consider it, jaw clenched as he takes in the presence hovering just outside his immediate

awareness. He revels in the feeling of air trapped in the back of his throat before he lets it out slowly. "Hey Techno."

There's a moment of silence, and Tommy listens to the shifts of fabric and the near-silent noises of the gun shifting in his hands. "Hey Tommy," he says at last. "Funny seeing you here."

Swallowing around the lump in his throat, he spares one last look at the terrified face of Niki. She's managed to reposition herself in order to pull him up, but now she's waiting. It would be so easy for her to stick her hand down, for Tommy to grab it and haul himself up before Techno can get a shot off. All it would take is some kind of distraction, and there are a million things in here that can be chunked at him.

But honestly, the chances of him remaining unaware of Niki up in the vents are good. He doesn't want to draw attention to her, and besides, some sick part of him kind of wants to see what will happen. He and Techno's relationship has always been an explosive mess, but it feels like everything might've been leading up to this.

Tommy?

It's fine. Techno probably won't shoot on sight. Be ready to grab me at a moment's notice, though.

Tommy slowly turns around.

Techno's face is unreadable, as it was in the early days before Tommy got to know every tick. As it was in the later days after his separation from Wilbur, when nothing made sense anymore, least of all Techno. His gun is held steady in his hand; the safety is off, but his finger is hanging very loosely over the trigger. It's not close enough to be threatening—it doesn't seem like Techno is very eager to shoot him, which *is* comforting—but close enough to be a warning.

One misstep, one single reason for Techno to suspect Tommy might be a bigger threat, and *BAM*. Bullet right in his chest. Which is, actually, better than his head. More survivable.

Tommy sniffs. "How'd you know I was here?"

"Besides the curls sticking out the back of your hat—" Techno snorts as Tommy immediately slaps a hand to the back of his neck, feeling a few wispy strays that had slipped out; he swears violently. "—and the fact that you're the only one capable of working the TV? Androids don't typically drop things, let alone *right* in front of the only occupied cell in the block. Just a *little bit* suspicious."

This situation is serious. He's trapped in a closet with Techno pointing a gun at him, the seconds dwindling down until their eventual discovery. And yet, he scowls at the jab at their plan. "Yeah, well nobody else noticed—"

"That's cause they're stupid, sleep-deprived, and now battling with rogue technology."

"—and *besides*, I *am* an android."

Techno stares at him. His hold on the gun shifts, and Tommy's thirium pump stutters. "You're a *deviant*," he corrects, watching with apathy as Tommy flinches at the descriptor.

"Then take the shot, Techno," Tommy snaps. "I'm sure you have your orders." He makes a wild gesture with his hands that Techno doesn't even blink at; his only movement is the gun staying centered with his chest. "I'm a wanted machine, after all."

"Eh, androids aren't really my jurisdiction." Techno watches him, something that Tommy can't decipher glinting in his eyes. "That's more Wilbur's area. Well, and then Schlatt's—" Tommy flinches. "—and now nobody's, really. I guess George's, but he's not a cop so..."

They fall into silence. With each passing second, Tommy becomes less afraid and more agitated, hands still raised but only halfway now—like he's not sure he needs to be holding them up. Niki's breath seems so loud in his ears; he knows it's just because he's an android and hyper-attuned to her presence, but the logic is doing little.

Techno lets out a slow breath through his nose. "I'm not going to *shoot* you, Tommy." He lowers his gun, tucking it back into the holster strapped around his chest and shoulders.

Tommy drops his hands. "Oh? Could've fooled me. Charged in here with your big man gun and your scowly face and our track record."

Techno scowls, and Tommy feels vindication. "I could still reconsider," he warns.

Tommy, wisely, makes the decision to shut up. But not for long. "Why did you even follow after me? What do you want?"

Techno is silent for a long time, jaw working and eyes narrowed. "I'm not a snitch, okay?" He crosses his arms over his chest. "I don't really care about this whole deviant uprising other than to say '*I told you so.*' You *never* create advanced AI with the ability to overtake humanity and a thin set of rules stopping them. It's the biggest mistake you can make." He sighs, eyes squeezed shut, fingers pinching the bridge of his nose in a move that is so Phil. "And yeah, I should be turning you in right now, but I don't really care. I just came here to say—" he wavers then, jaw clenched so tight Tommy is honestly worried he's going to crack a tooth.

He lets out another shuddery breath. "Take care of Wilbur, okay?" Tommy, too shocked to say anything, simply nods. "And keep in mind that while android sympathizers are growing in number, so are the extremists who rise to oppose them." He fixes Tommy with some kind of look. "And those people are often louder, more publicly prevalent, and more prone to violence."

Tommy's brow furrows as he desperately tries to parse through the Techno-speak. When it dawns on him, it nearly strikes him dumb. "We'll be careful," he says. He hesitates for a second, but when Techno says nothing more, Tommy steps up onto the first shelf, hoisting himself up.

"And kid?" Tommy cranes his head over his shoulder automatically. He's never heard Techno call him that, but a whole host of other people have—Wilbur, Quackity, Schlatt. "Turn off that damn TV."

Tommy laughs before he can help it. "Sure can do." Sensing the end of the conversation, Niki thrusts her hand out of the vent, grabbing him around the wrist. Tommy lets himself hang for a moment and shoots a strained grin over his shoulder. "See you around, big man."

Techno grunts, which Tommy chooses to take as an enthusiastic goodbye and a heartfelt good luck in Techno speak.

The ducts are dusty and cramped, making Tommy's breath hitch and pick up speed when he can't move without his shoulders brushing the walls. He can feel Niki's fuming from their mental connection, which is still up, and prepares himself to be berated later, when the situation isn't so tense.

The duct leads to an air vent on the roof. Niki eases the vent off, cursing as she barely catches the grate from landing on the roof. Crouching, they creep across the roof until they reach the side. The building isn't very tall, but tall enough to warrant some caution. She goes first, hanging off the side and remaining stationary as Tommy uses her as a ladder, gripping her shoulders, her waist, and then eventually hugging her legs until he can drop semi-safely. The impact reverberates through him, his joints creaking, but he doesn't have a second to complain before she's dropping into his open arms.

They slink around the building, stopping only for Tommy to switch clothes again and offer her his jacket and the spare hat shoved in its pocket. She pulls it on over her very obviously android clothes, pulls the hat low over her LED, and then they're off. Just before they pull out of range, however, Tommy switches the TV in the precinct off.

It's tense and silent, creeping through the city. It's also cold; the beginnings of snow and frost are starting to appear, and by the time they're well into their trek, it's snowing pretty hard. Tommy has to keep clenching and unclenching his fists to keep the thirium from freezing, and Niki has her hands shoved deep within the jacket pockets.

By the time they finally reach Wilbur's house, they don't have the energy to do more than collapse on the couch and wait for Wilbur. Every second seems like an hour, but eventually, they both fall into an uneasy stasis.

When the door eases open with a noisy creak, they both lurch awake. There's Wilbur, cheeks red from the cold, snowflakes caught up in his hair. He catches sight of them, half-frozen and tucked together on the couch, and his breath of relief shudders through him. "*Oh thank god.*" He pulls them both into a hug, pressing their icy faces into his neck.

Tommy doesn't know how long they stay like that, all three of them shaking and shivering from both the cold and the aftereffects of the stress of the night.

"Horrible plan," Wilbur says when they've had a moment to recover, to pull themselves together again. "Horrible, *horrible* plan. You two are never allowed to scheme again, you hear?"

Time keeps moving on.

Miraculously, Phil, Schlatt, nor George ever show up on their doorstep, demanding to do another invasive search for Niki, this time. Their plan seems to have worked well enough—no cameras visible to catch their frantic flight—and Quackity and Charlie plus a bar full of eyewitnesses seem to serve as a good enough alibi for Wilbur.

Tommy is glad in a distant sort of way, in the way that light is refracted and diffused through water. Muted. It's less shit he has to deal with, which means he just has to deal with the normal shit: sleeping in a new, too-soft bed, with Wilbur tucked only a bedroom away, and Niki's new residence on the couch. He feels boxed in, in that way. Trapped in the room of a dead kid, stripped of all its identifying markers, save for the faint beer stain on the carpet.

Wilbur says it's his now, but Tommy still can't apply the concept of ownership to himself, so he doesn't.

George and Phil had done a pretty thorough investigation into his own disappearance, or so Wilbur tells him on one of the days he braves going outside his room. With Niki's word—and the heaping of evidence they found in Schlatt's apartment—they had questioned Schlatt. Eventually, he had cracked after one too many inconsistencies and had confessed to the fabrication of his story and to damaging Tommy.

From Wilbur's account, George was pretty pissed. Schlatt got slapped with more fees than he knew what to do with and a long, long suspension, both for destruction of company property and for his treatment of Wilbur during the investigation. The higher-ups were still debating whether or not to just fire him, but his case record apparently spoke for itself. They decided to put him on a long probation and back through some basic training and rehabilitation, with the promise to reconvene at a later date to assess his progress.

And Tommy? He doesn't know how to feel about that; he can't feel, some lingering part of him insists, and, no matter how weak and faint that part of him is, it still stings.

He thinks maybe he should be sad that they're still considering letting Schlatt back after all he did. He thinks maybe he should be angry at the injustice of it all.

But honestly? He just doesn't care. He doesn't want to think about Schlatt. He doesn't want to think about anything, really, least of all himself. All he really wants—needs, honestly—is to curl up into a ball and stop existing. It's kind of hard when Niki and Wilbur keep poking their unhelpful noses into his business, gently knocking on the door when they haven't seen him all day.

He's feeling frighteningly apathetic nowadays, and the most emotion he can manage through the haze of his own whirring thoughts is annoyance. He can suddenly, startlingly, empathize with Wilbur in the early days of their partnership, when all Tommy was trying to do was pull Wilbur out of his own self-destructive spiral.

Wilbur eventually goes back to work since there's no reason to suspect him anymore, although it's with a degree of hesitancy. It's clear, from the way his eyes linger on Tommy too long when he first tells them, that he doesn't feel right going back to work when his well-being is so up in the air. And so, although the mystery of one Tommy Innit is never quite solved—they know Schlatt had something to do with it, but not the full picture—the investigation is dropped, and Wilbur's suspension abates.

George is still pretty pissed, or so Wilbur tells him after running into the man in the precinct one day.

Just like that, things sink into a new normal. Wilbur goes to work each day, leaving Niki and Tommy alone in the house to entertain themselves. It's quieter without him, and Tommy isn't sure whether to be appreciative of this newfound peace or to resent Wilbur for taking the noise with him.

Everything seems to be so mixed up nowadays. His feelings are never clear, always mixed and convoluted. They sit in a jumbled mess in the pit of his chest, pressing against his heart until he can feel its rhythm in his throat.

Niki seems conscious of this, at least to some degree. To say she is wary of him is a massive disservice, but there's a certain carefulness to her steps, to her words. She seeks out his company to ease her own loneliness but, at the same time, she seems worried about pushing him too far. Once again, she can only prove how clever she truly is, as she connects his newfound retreat with his previous vehement insistence on his deviant status.

She invites him to help her bake frequently, which is her way to pass the time in Wilbur's absence. Tommy accepts the first few times, watching with envy as she easily rolls out dough into perfect little balls or how confidently she navigates the stove; he's never been good at it before, but now the flicker of fire has him recalling, with startling accuracy, the feeling of hot metal pressed against the base of his skull.

After those first few times, however—where they do, to his eternal surprise, churn out something edible—he starts rejecting her offers. Niki, for all her attempts, still seems reluctant to leave his side and yet unwilling to push him beyond what he can handle.

Tommy wants to be thankful for it, but all he finds when he scours his gut is irritation. She's never been this careful around him before, not since she deemed him 'NOT A THREAT'. It didn't stop her from dragging him when he revealed how deep his mistrust of deviants really goes, not when her life was on the line. Why is she starting now?

There's this strange gap between them, built because of their unresolved conflict from before, Niki's gratitude, and her strange hesitancy around his new deviant status. It's, to put it bluntly, fucking annoying, but he'll be caught dead before he's the one to bring it up.

And yeah, he still feels guilty for his treatment of her before, of the bias he had built into his code, but he doesn't really... get it. He understands why it would hurt her, but he doesn't really understand why that's *his* responsibility. Like yea, he feels bad about saying things that hurt her, but her instance that he was a deviant cut just as deep.

Although, maybe she was right, after all. It's what he is, now, isn't it?

Tommy, ultimately, decides not to bring it up. His feelings are too mixed, his mind chasing itself in circles whenever he has the thought. He's not a deviant, and there's nothing wrong with denying it. There's nothing wrong with fearing becoming the thing you've been built to hunt, and although he's eternally sorry for hurting Niki, he's been hurt, too. She should've known how much the thought hurt him, from his obvious reactions, and not pushed the idea. She's at fault, too.

Right?

Doesn't it matter that he's been hurt, too? Why should he have to adjust to the thought of being something wrong just to cater to her feelings? Is it so wrong of him to detest the very idea of being a deviant?

...Probably.

That's probably why Niki was so pissed at him before. Because his mind can't comprehend the thought of being anything other than what he was. Because being the thing he hunted is unthinkable. Impossible.

Unnatural.

So Tommy retreats even more. Even from Niki. He refuses to unleash any of his harmful, spiraling thoughts onto someone so innocent, onto Niki, who shouldn't have to deal with this when she's already been through so much. And he retreats, even more, from Wilbur. Because he doesn't deserve to deal with it, either. Not when Tommy himself has put him through so much.

It doesn't stop him from feeling Wilbur's absence like a missing limb—a constant ache in his heart that's somehow even worse than it was when he was with Schlatt. They haven't had a single serious conversation since Tommy got back, but it's better this way. It needs to be better this way, even if it feels like his heart has been carved out of his chest.

This self-imposed isolation... it's the only way. The only way to keep them safe from the turbulent storms of his angry thoughts, the whiplash of his constantly churning emotions. Because both of them think he's a deviant, and both of them receive some modicum of comfort from that thought.

But Tommy doesn't feel like a deviant, even if, deep down, he knows. Even when he saw the wall shatter with his own two eyes, hands barely brushing against its angry red surface. Even if he defied direct orders without any of the loopholes he usually hides behind—no overarching orders from Cyberlife this time. He doesn't feel like a deviant. He doesn't even feel any different than he usually does and that?

That fucking terrifies him.

Why doesn't he feel any different? Why is nothing different? Was he broken all this time? A faulty machine cursed with a facsimile of humanity?

Or is he such a failure that he can't do anything right? He can't even deviate properly—still stuck with the thoughts and the empty void of emotion that characterize obedient robots.

He doesn't know which thought scares him more, so instead of subjecting Niki and Wilbur to himself, he spends his days tucked away in the room dubbed as 'his'. He curls up on a too-soft bed, with his head buried under layers of pillows so he doesn't have to listen to Niki's gentle insistence, or to the sound of their gentle conversation when Wilbur finally gets home.

He only curls up tighter, shoves the pillow down over his ears—although who is he fooling? Cotton and stuffing can do very little against his advanced sensors—and stares at the empty slots where his orders *should be*.

"Oh, hey!" Niki glances up from whatever she was hunched over on the counter at his silent approach. Her hair is tied back in a loose ponytail, and his eyes immediately fixate on the way the strands fall out, brushing against her cheeks and sticking to the tops of her shoulders. She looks truly glad to see him—eyes crinkled around the corners, mouth tilted up into a smile—even if he can't quite recall the last honest-to-god conversation they've had that didn't end with Tommy slinking away. Probably those few grateful words exchanged when he first snapped the lock on her cell, when they had clasped bare forearms and pressed their foreheads together and smothered gleeful, fearful smiles for a few stolen moments before they had to attempt the daunting task of slipping out unnoticed.

Tommy stands opposite of her, across the counter, hands hanging limp by his sides. He can't quite figure out what to do with them—folding them across his chest seems too aggressive and closed off, but anything else is unthinkable. He needs to keep them close, although he can't quite figure out why; what, in Wilbur's home, does he need to defend himself from?

It's late—the lack of moonlight is like a black hole, dark night catching the gauzy curtains. The only light on is a tiny lamp Wilbur must've pulled out of the attic. Niki has it sitting next to the fridge, casting golden light and shadows across the kitchen rather than use the overhead lights. Probably to avoid disturbing Wilbur, who fell asleep on the couch a while ago. His light snores and occasional snorts disturb the otherwise peace of the house.

"Hi," he says, softly, in that barely there way he seems to carry himself nowadays. He feels too awkward with the gaping space between them, so he leans on the counter, pressing his forearms against a countertop as lukewarm as him.

Now that he's looking—really looking, letting his eyes focus on her rather than having them skate around the space she takes up—he can see the things she's laid out on the counter. A thin sheet of plastic takes up most of the space, and, on top of that, a mountain of flour. Her hands are in it, coated in flour so thick it looks like her hands are bloated, cracking along the curve of her joints. And when it becomes clear he has no more to say, she returns to her work, kneading at the dough.

It's nice to see her so thoroughly involved in something. So thoroughly and unapologetically *enjoying* it. Her model isn't built to eat. It wasn't even built with taste sensors beyond the bare minimum—detecting too much salt, sugar, fat, toxins, etc, etc.

And yet, Niki keeps on cooking, relying on Wilbur and his functioning taste buds to adjust her cultivated collection of recipes. At the very least, she's found something to throw herself into following Wilbur's return to work and Tommy's frequent absences from their shared living spaces.

Tommy slumps over the counter further, the counter digging into his elbow, his chin digging in his palm. He lets those two points ground him even as the rest of him threatens to float away, half-lidded eyes watching as Niki works.

She rolls out a thick lump of dough, floury fingers scrambling on the edges of the rolling pin. Automatically, his system pulls out the ingredients making up the lump, as well as the most likely dish she's making, but he dismisses the information with nothing more than a lazy blink. The kitchen is overly warm from the pre-heated oven, adding to the glow and the general surreal, floating feeling of this scene. Eventually, Niki abandons the rolling pin altogether and pushes her stiff fingers into it.

It was okay, he thinks distantly with a frown as he watches her work, as she pursues something *meaningful*, creating something from nothing more than a few scattered ingredients. It was okay when he had to focus on rescuing Niki. It was panic-inducing and terrifying, yes—the chilling thought that they might lose her, that he might fail *again*—but it gave him something to do. Something to focus on other than his own self-pity and hatred, and the lingering thoughts of Schlatt that consume his mind. It gave him a mission and a drive, and when he was too devoted to the task, he could almost pretend that nothing had changed.

And now, now that she's safe and here and somewhat happy—if he ignores the growing restlessness that defaults her expression the second she lets her guard down—he has nothing. No mission to occupy his thoughts, no task filling up the corner of his vision. He has the one thing he was never built to have: complete and total agency.

Before he realizes his mouth is even open, the words are already slipping past. "Why do you do this?" Niki glances up, eyebrows raised, and Tommy steels himself for the conversation he's unwillingly gotten himself into. "Why bake if you can't taste? Why bake at all?"

He hates that he asked. He regrets it the second it came out of his mouth, but he hates it even more because of the way Niki looks at him. Brows furrowed, mouth slightly drawn down, eyes wide.

Pity.

It makes his skin crawl, his shoulders instinctually hunch to protect himself from such an invisible, illogical threat. Thankfully, she ducks her head eventually, taking her too-seeing eyes and her scathing sympathy with her. "Because I like it," she says, simply, as if that should be the answer to all his questions. As if that answers anything, quells the confusion washing over him in thrashing, violent waves. "Because it makes me happy to do." She pats

the ball of dough. Her handprint disappears in seconds, swallowed up by the ball. "Dough is really tough, and kneading it takes a lot of work. It's a good way to ease frustration."

Her hair sways as she turns, the strands catching the loose flour on her chin. Her jaw is set, and she considers him, and his odd, deflective stance. "Come here," she decides. He doesn't move, not until she makes another jerky gesture with her head. She shuffles over, making room for him at the counter. Still, it's a tight squeeze to fit them both in front of the clear mat, and their arms, from shoulder to elbow, are pressed together.

"Here," she says and lifts her hands. Slowly, hesitantly, she grabs Tommy by the wrists and guides his hands over to the mound of dough. It's cool and gritty to the touch, covered with flour. Experimentally, he claws the tops of his fingers into the dough. It squishes but bounces back.

"Oh," he says, brow furrowed. He's not sure he's ever touched bread before, let alone dough. He steps forward instinctively, hip pressing against the counter. It presses into the dent there, but he pays it no mind, instead letting the dough absorb his hand.

"You like it?"

Tommy drags his nails over the surface, watching the way it disrupts its smooth consistency, displaces the flour brushed on the top.

"Here, try kneading it."

It takes a few minutes—and some very thorough explanations from Niki with informative gestures and, more often than not, her hands on the back of his—before Tommy eventually gets it. He presses the heel of his palm into the dough, feeling it fight back against the pressure, until it relents, allowing his hand further into it until he can feel the counter beneath it.

"Good." Niki places a hand on his shoulder, directing his arm into the proper position. "You don't have to be so considerate. It's just dough." He pushes again, harder this time. The dough quells its futile resistance much easier this time, and Tommy blinks. "See? Really good for frustration." Then, quieter, she says, "You look like you could use it."

He ignores that, because he—in no shape or form—feels up to addressing it or having any conversation in its ballpark. He can feel her eyes on the side of his head, her hair brushing against his neck from their proximity.

"We don't have to talk about it—"

"Good."

"—but I'm not going to pretend I don't *see* it. Wilbur might be content with ignoring it, but I'm not."

He's seen the tight smiles, the way Wilbur's eyes never quite match the smile, the tension in his muscles as he walks on eggshells around him. "Content is not exactly the word I would

use."

Niki presses her lips together, her hands suddenly stilling where she'd taken over the work again. Tommy hadn't even noticed his own hands had fallen to the wayside, covered in bits of wet dough and rough flour. "Not content," she agrees. "But he refuses to push you in the direction you need." He picks at the dough stuck to the webbing between his thumb and the rest of his fingers. "He's terrified that if he pushes too hard, you'll run."

Tommy huffs. "And you don't agree?"

"No, I don't. You, Tommy? You need to be pushed. More than anyone else, you need to be in motion. You need something—*anything*—to pursue." Her lips curl up to bare her teeth, and Tommy notes the way it transforms her entire face. "A *mission* to complete."

"What am I supposed to do, then?" Heat is expanding inside his chest. His own lips curl back, but he doesn't look at her. Not once. Instead, his eyes trace the lines on the floor.

This is where Wilbur had collapsed, drunk on bitter wine and his own dread, even if it wasn't quite so existential. Only a few feet away is where Tommy was shoved against the wall, a hand closing around his throat.

It's not a pretty memory, not even close, but those things? They make sense to him. He can take a step back, remove himself and his cloudy judgment from the situation, and think about the *why* of it all. He can pinpoint the factors that all piled together to equal an alcohol addiction, to equal a heated confrontation, to a man sobbing on the floor in a sticky puddle of wine.

But with himself?

His future is so terribly cloudy. He can't begin to picture what it might look like—what it *could* look like—outside of Cyberlife's rigid control. "Niki, I don't know how to exist anymore."

Niki takes a step back, out of his immediate space. He can feel her eyes on him, but he doesn't dare look to capture her expression. He doesn't think he could make it out even if he tried, with how fast his system is running—his thoughts seeping through his clenched fingers like water.

"I don't know what to do without someone telling me to, so if you think you can—can look at this mess and pick something out of it, by all means! Tell me what to do." He takes a step forward without realizing it; Niki takes another step back, mouth pressed into a thin line. "Niki, *tell me what to do*. I'll beg, if—if that's what you want, just *please*—" his voice cracks, eyes caught on the way the red of his own LED flashes on her face, reflects in her wide eyes.

Niki's back hits the opposite counter, and her next breath out is silent and shuddery. Her eyes slip closed, her face a study of helplessness. Then, she steps closer to him, swallowing the lump in her throat. Hesitation bleeds into her painfully slow movements, but she reaches up.

Her hands are cold and still covered with flour, despite her many attempts to brush it off on the stained apron wrapped around her waist. They fit on his face like they were always meant to be there, fingers brushing along the round edge of his jaw, thumbs painting his under eyes with flour. Her next breath in is as shuddery as her exhale.

"I can't tell you how to live." He slumps forward, into her hold. Her thumb digs into the underside of his jaw, keeping his head upright. "It's not—" she makes a frustrated noise, brow furrowed so far, wrinkles and lines and *worry* marring her youthful face. Imperfections. *Humanity*. "It's not the same for everyone! There is no one universal purpose. But finding your own?" She smiles, small and bitter and calming despite the concern still crinkling around her eyes. "It's something so *personal*. I wouldn't rob you of it for anything in the world."

Tommy feels like he's breaking apart. Niki's strength and her tight grip on his face are the only things keeping him together; the only things grounding him from the cracks that surely must be splintering his thirium pump apart. "But I don't know *how*."

"I know." Her cold thumbs soothe his overheated skin, rubbing flour into his skin like he'd seen her do to the dough not minutes ago. "But do you want to know something?" He thinks he might nod, frantically, into her dirty hands. "Nobody fucking does. Humans don't come out of the womb with a handy guidebook on finding the meaning of their life. There are thousands of books, thousands of philosophers that wrestle with the same question. It's one of the few ways we're truly equal, right now."

His own breath is fragmented and shuddery. Tommy slumps forward, forehead landing on Niki's shoulder. He doesn't know how she's so strong, and he doesn't even mean the way she thoughtlessly holds his entire weight. "That's so shitty," he says in a whisper.

Eventually, her hand detangles itself from his shirt, coming to thread into his hair. "I know. But you don't have to do it without help."

The door shuts behind him with a quiet click, a noise soon lost to the snow-covered yards, the slush-filled streets, the cold, empty sky. Wilbur automatically tilts his head back, taking in the exquisite darkness that lies above; few stars shine through the haze of city light pollution, and those that do are obscured by the puffy clouds that occasionally roll across the sky. His eyes instinctively seek them out, but he finds himself looking for far too long. Instead, he drops his gaze level to the mess that counts as his backyard—to Niki, who stands in the middle of his unfinished patio, her footsteps alone marring the fresh snow.

"Hey," he says, even though both she and Wilbur know that she heard him long before his awkward, fumbling attempts to get the door open. "There you are." He steps carelessly, creating his own set of steps as he comes to a halt right next to her.

She doesn't acknowledge him for a long time, head tipped back. The dull light of the back of his house hasn't been turned on, plunging his narrow strip of land into darkness. It's edged by

other light—the golden tones of the old couple's home to his left, mingling with the atrocious Christmas lights that the newlyweds had left up on his other side. Her eyes are closed, cheeks flushed a healthy blue with the thirium pumping through her system. She breathes, one steady breath after another, but no mist follows each exhale.

Wilbur shoves his hands in his pockets, as his fingers start to prickle in the bitter air. There is little wind tonight. Little movement, save for the slow drag of the clouds across the sky. It's night, and everything is silent and still. If he focuses real hard, he might be able to pick out the faint notes of the record player from inside.

He turns, focusing back on the brush of his bare arm against hers. Androids rarely have a temperature of their own—the only example he can truly think of is when Tommy had been hit with that random fever—but they do retain one. He's become accustomed to the skin-warm heat from when they sit together on the couch, arms pressed together until the plastic of her skeleton, the rubber of her skin, catch his heat. And now, Wilbur shivers as he feels just how cold her skin is. She's made of snow and ice and the freezing reflection of the hidden stars.

When he glances up, it's to find Niki looking at him, eyes blinking as rapidly as her LED is.

"Hello," he says again, in case she didn't hear him the first time. She blinks again, slowly, and turns back to watch the way the long blades of grass just barely peek out of the curtain of snow.

"Hi."

Wilbur follows her gaze. He watches the still, bare branches of the scattered trees. They're firmly in the back half of winter now, but they still have so long to go. Niki's been talking him into purchasing gardening supplies at the first sign of spring; she's ridiculously passionate about it, especially since he knows she has little interest in plants beyond their culinary offering. Neither of them point this out, although he's sure they both become acutely aware of the closed door at the end of the hall during these conversations. "What're you doing out here?"

Niki breathes in, and Wilbur subconsciously mimics her; when they breathe out in synch, only Wilbur's births a fresh cloud of condensation. "I needed some air," she says, her voice thick and halting with all the words she doesn't say. Wilbur knows, though, as well as he can; she's restless from being trapped in his house, from the restrictions continuously placed on her. It's a much kinder one, but he knows his home is a prison all the same, and her lack of freedom grates on her in such obvious ways—in the tension in her jaw, in the lines around her eyes, in the stilted way she runs her fingers through her hair and pulls it back. "And I wanted to see the stars." She smiles, eyebrows furrowed. "A pity you can't see much from here."

Wilbur tips his head back. "Yeah. A pity," he echoes, voice weak as something tugs at his memory. "I think Tommy said the same thing." Flashes of his dark, messy room, and of Tommy's fingers slipping under the crack in the door, pressed against his own. "Maybe we should drive out to the country sometime. See the stars for real."

Niki smiles again, but this one is more pained, somehow. "That would be nice."

Wilbur's breath catches in his throat. So they're having this conversation, are they? He hasn't been oblivious to the building tension, nor to the things left unspoken, lingering in the growing spaces between their words. To the growing restlessness in her busy hands or to the plain desire painted over her face as she stared out the window.

He had hoped, however, that they had a little more time. That Niki could content herself with their company for a little bit longer. It seems, as he watches Niki wring her hands together—skin retracting and shimmering back in place with every touch of her ice-cold fingers—that their time is dwindling down with each second.

Wilbur tips his head back again so he doesn't have to watch the conflict play out across her face. "What were you thinking about?"

"The stars," she says. "And the future."

"The future," he echoes without much energy. *What a daunting thought.* Until meeting Tommy—and not even then, he can admit, if only to himself—he didn't think he had much of a future. His time was dwindling down like an old candle, and the flame got larger with every sip, every puff of smoke, every time he stroked his thumb along the handle of his gun with something like consideration. He still can't quite picture the future—it's a blurry, fuzzy mess—but he knows he has one. He knows he needs to, for Tommy's sake if not for himself.

"It's weird. I've never thought about having a future before. I was just a machine and then I wasn't. But even then..." she trails off, biting the inside of her cheek. "I refused to let myself be hopeful. I knew there was no way I was getting out."

But she did. Because of Tommy.

"What does your future look like, then?"

Niki smiles, her face splitting in soft, bittersweet joy. "I'm going to open a bakery," she confesses into the night, to the stars that hide behind the pitch black sky. It isn't much of a confession; Wilbur has seen the growing pile of recipes tucked into the corner of the kitchen. He's been the test rat for each and every one. "I don't care how long it takes, or if I go bankrupt the day after. I'm going to open a bakery, and, one day, I'm going to be able to eat and enjoy the food I create."

Wilbur turns his head, and Niki does the same until they're looking at each, for the first time that night. There's something in her face; determination seems to be the obvious answer—written in the optimistic set of her mouth—but there's something else. Something much greater. Something that goes beyond even hope.

"Yeah?" he says despite its redundancy, despite the way his words are broken up with his smile. "Then it's my dream to eat at it."

He's rewarded with her laughter, sweet and clear. Her LED flickers a pleased, serene blue that illuminates the angular line of her jaw and the roundness of her cheeks. She looks so young

here, under the light of a weak moon. "Yeah, okay," she says, bumping her shoulder into his. She stays there even after her momentum has faded, leaning against him for some imagined support. "But actually?"

He looks behind him, at their dark house, at the sleeping figure he can't see within it.

Tommy tucks himself away into his room frequently, although Wilbur doubts he spends most of his time sleeping. He never seems to sleep long nor is he dead to the world like he used to be. He used to fall asleep on the couch amongst loud conversations, swaddled in the sounds of the TV blaring or guitar strumming right in his ear. He used to stay asleep no matter how Wilbur shifted under the weight of his head; no matter how much Wilbur ran his hands through his hair, scraped his nails along his scalp.

Now it seems that if Wilbur so much as steps wrong, Tommy is up and alert.

Wilbur remembers those days, all throughout foster care and well into the first year of his stay with Phil. It abated slowly—gradually—and, even then, he refused to sleep without Techno in his line of sight. So he knows how he's feeling, but that doesn't mean he knows how to fix it. If anything, that only makes it more frustrating, how overly aware he is of the problem. He's trying his fucking hardest—he's making this as safe a place as he knows how to—but it's not enough.

Wilbur lets out a shuddery breath, watches as it steams in the air. He considers everything for a long moment, but no matter the peaceful silence fueling his thoughts, or the time allowing him to consider, he never comes up with an adequate answer. "For so long now, I didn't want anything," he says with a halting caution. "I wanted to not exist, and I wanted to not have to be the one to take care of that. Before that, well... all I used to want was the position I have now."

And now, he exists. That's kind of all there is to it.

Niki hums in understanding. "Well, what do you like to do?"

"I used to like making music." He shrugs, feeling the intensity of her gaze on the side of his face. He thinks of the shattered guitar pieces he and Tommy had picked out of the floor together. Of the horribly, dying noise it had made when he beat it against the floor. "Music has always been my life."

He thinks of the record player, still droning on in the living room, a world away. It's banged up and dusty and so, so old but it's still here. It survived through Fundy's death and through Tommy's abandonment, and it always would survive, until time wore it down too much for it to create music, or until Wilbur was buried in the ground.

Music had always been in his life. And, he figured as he soaked in the moment, the cold, the faint sound of the playing record, it always would be. Even when he ran from it, it would always follow him. "I haven't made any music in a while. Before Tommy, I hadn't even played in years." He looks down at the faded calluses on his fingers and chuckles, deep in his throat. "I'm all rusty, but..."

Niki sways closer, letting their shoulders knock into each other. It's aching familiar—one of Tommy's signature moves. "That sounds nice, Wilbur. I'd love to hear you play."

He smiles, lips curling slightly. "Yeah. That would be nice. Pastries and shitty music. We make one hell of a pair."

She laughs, her head bowing to rest against his shoulder.

For a while, they stay like that. They stew in the stillness and the silence, in the comfort of the darkness and of the faded stars. He can feel Niki's breath against the side of his neck—a sort of lukewarm puff of air, odd and inhuman, and yet familiar from the times Tommy had fallen asleep on him.

And then Niki whispers her second confession into the night. "I can't stay here forever, you know."

Wilbur inhales, listens to it rattle around in his ribcage. "I know." He's not naïve. He's not foolish enough to consider that someone as independent and who values their newfound autonomy above nearly all else would come to depend on yet another person to survive. He wasn't foolish enough to think that she would be content with just this.

He had hoped they had a little more time, though.

Wilbur wraps a hand around her shoulders, pressing it against her bare arm even when he nearly hisses at its iciness. He pulls her into his side, and together, they stare at the stars.

Tommy listens to Wilbur's door swing open, quiet despite the creak of the rusted hinges Wilbur always forgets to oil. He expects to listen to his soft footsteps towards the bathroom, the flick of the light switch, the quiet click of the door as it shuts but never locks—there's no reason to when he's the only one to ever use it.

Wilbur doesn't follow the unconscious pattern. He falters, loiters, hesitates—whatever word fits the bill; he stands in a darkened hallway, his near-silent breath the only sound. Despite himself—despite the near catatonic state Tommy had descended into, laying on his side on the bed—he's curious. He pushes himself up and leans precariously off the bed, just far enough to catch sight of him in the silver in the door.

Nothing about his posture is telling. The hallway is too dark, lit only by a single lamp left on in the living room. Tommy can't make out his expression past the shadows.

Wilbur waits like a prey animal—light on his toes, head cocked to the side—before he seems to come to some kind of conclusion. He turns on his heel, golden light haloing in his mussed curls, and walks towards the cracked open door. Tommy sits up a little straighter, blinking his brain back into working order for whatever conversation is inevitably about to unfold.

But Wilbur doesn't enter. He doesn't even darken the doorstep for very long until he lowers himself. The floor creaks and groans as Wilbur shuffles, distributing his weight until he's comfortable; Tommy can't see him anymore, save for the light under the door that he blocks. He can only hear his breath, and, if he focuses hard enough, the quiet *thump-thump-thump* of his heart.

"Tommy?" Wilbur asks, his voice nothing but a whisper.

Tommy breathes through the knee-jerk panic, the prey instinct to *run*. Wilbur isn't threatening—he hasn't been in a long time—but something within him still demands his retreat.

Instead, Tommy shuffles around on the bed, settling into a more comfortable position; his spine presses into the cool wall, his knobby knees press into his chest, his chin rests on the top of his interlocked hands.

"Hey, Toms." Fondness leaks into whispered words warped by the way the corners of his mouth curl up. He seems to take the slight creak of Fundy's bed as some kind of greeting. His LED flickers yellow—it's one of the only lights in the room, and it fills the corner of his eye, golden and warm and so terribly off balance.

"It's weird—" he says after a pause that isn't quite awkward, but in the gray space in between. "—to be on this side of the door. I never quite got used to being on the inside but being on the outside..." he trails off; a loud thud rattles the doorframe, and Tommy can only imagine that was the back of his head hitting the wall. "I guess it's forcing me to have greater respect for you. I have no idea how you knew what to say. How you filled the silence so well." He laughs, although it sounds stilted and awkward and forced. "It's a little daunting, in all honesty."

Moonlight filters in through gauzy curtains, muted and ineffective. It doesn't light up the alcohol stain Tommy knows is in the center of the room, nor does it slant along the blue walls. It does, however, fall in a single strip that mixes and mingles with the golden light of the hallway. It's an odd thing to see; you'd think one would cancel out the other, but they don't. They swirl together into something wholly indescribable.

"Niki says—" he pauses, and Tommy can hear the telltale sound of him wetting his lips. A nervous tick. He breathes out quietly, shivery and unstable. "Well, you know what she thinks. She's always been the best and brashest of us." An interesting descriptor, but not one Tommy can really find fault in. "She doesn't like you hiding away all the time. And she doesn't like that I let you. That's how she phrased it. *'Let you'*. Like I have any control over you. Like I should have any control over you."

He quiets his voice, hushing it to a whisper. Tommy can only presume it's because the subject of this unwitting conversation is asleep on the couch; they're both aware of how lightly androids sleep. "The stars were beautiful the other night. Pretty visible, too, despite the—" he pauses, presumably making some kind of gesture that is wholly himself. "—general city fog that hangs above us in a haze. Although, they can't compare when you've seen them out in the country." He whistles, low. "That's a whole other creature." He pauses. "I'd love to show you them, someday. I think you'd really love it."

Tommy tucks his chin against his knees and closes his eyes. He tries to picture it, impatiently shoving away the images his system automatically retrieves at the slightest thought. Instead, he envisions what he thinks they might look like. Stars sprawling across the ink-black sky, backdropped by veins of color; deep royal purples, and midnight blues, and the fading golden light of the dying sun, all only exposed due to his mechanical eyes. The stars, bright white lights that dot the sky as often as air enters his lungs; both indispensable, unthinkable without.

"You weren't wrong, you know? All those months ago. I've traveled a lot." It hits him then, like a punch to the gut. The first time a door separated them, the first time Tommy sat against Wilbur's door and just talked, he mentioned the idea of Wilbur traveling. He hadn't thought he was truly listening; he hadn't thought he would remember his silly, inconsequential words after all this time. "The places I've seen..." he sounds wistful, adoring. "I'd love to show you those, too."

He holds off for only a mere second before he caves, poetry spilling from his lips about all the places he's seen. Crumbling ruins overrun by nature, ivy crawling into the cracks of ancient castles, moss soaking up rain in the Scottish highlands. Bustling cities illuminated even in the dead of night, mouth-watering smells that wafted over from shabby little carts tucked away in alleyways with destroyed brick roads. Dozens of sunsets, poised over every ocean, over snowy-tipped mountains, along the edges of wild forests.

It makes something ache within him, at every flash of imagery that runs through his mind. Without realizing it, Wilbur's words had drawn him in like a siren song. He's standing in the center of the room, where the moonlight and lamplight meet. His feet are lit up with gold and silver, and he wriggles his socked feet in wonder. He waivers then, entirely too conscious to mindlessly seek out Wilbur and entirely too alone to burrow back into his borrowed bed. He sways back and forth like a shaky leaf, undecided.

Eventually, he walks forward on silent feet, on padded carpet. He settles as quick and quiet as he can, hands bracing his descent as he sits with the doorframe pressed into his back, in the exact opposite spot as Wilbur. He can hear much more here; Wilbur's rasping breaths, the skitter of his heartbeat resonating even through the wood, the way his fingernails lightly scrape along the wooden floors.

"Your raccoons miss you, you know? They think me a poor substitute." He huffs a laugh. "Although I think it's because I'm much more reserved with them. You've made them fat." The ghost of a smile hovers over Tommy's lips; he knows exactly which raccoon Wilbur is thinking of. He's a little guy with a fat tail and a large, pouch-like belly. He's one of the most affectionate, too, at least with Tommy. He always allows him to run his fingers over his little ears, down the juts of his spine, fondling his big belly. "They stopped digging in the trash though. I think the neighbors would kiss you if they knew the cause. I've never seen so many exposed trash cans since that raccoon gang started patrolling the streets."

He misses them, too. He hadn't realized he had—he didn't have space in his brain for anything that wasn't the emptiness of his new existence. Now that he's thinking of them, though, there's a deep ache in his chest.

"Work is boring without you. I never wanted a partner, not since—" he cuts off with a strangled sound that turns into a cough at the last second. "Well, you know." Tommy's fingers curl around the carpet, threading between them. "I never tried to hide how little I wanted a partner, but... you grew on me, Toms. It's no fun to look at dead bodies without trying to stop you from eating the evidence. It's just kind of sad. I still have Quackity and Charlie, but they've got their own thing going on. It's different to be a part of a partnership. All the little inside jokes. All the knowledge you get from spending so much time around another person. All the habits.

"I keep standing just slightly to the left in a room. Just slightly off-center. Just enough to make it obvious that there should be someone at my shoulder. I didn't even notice it until some officer pointed it out, but now I can't stop. It feels wrong to stand in the center. My side feels perpetually *empty*."

Tommy feels perpetually empty. The air around him is lonely and still, all cold silences and the stifled smell of a room that hasn't been aired out in years. He misses Wilbur (*of course he does*; one of the first thoughts running through his mind the second that beer bottle had smacked into his head was that Wilbur couldn't handle another death) but it's never been as apparent as it is right now, with only an ajar door separating them.

Wilbur has stopped trying to formulate words, settling for humming. It's no song Tommy recognizes, but it's soft and soothing, and Tommy allows himself these brief seconds of comfort. Of the familiarity of Wilbur's low voice, of the bourbon-smooth melody he hangs into the air. Eventually, though, he stops humming.

"You don't have to pretend, you know," he says in a voice trying at casual, after a silence so long Tommy was starting to think he fell asleep against the door. "Not around me."

Tommy sits up straighter, spine pressed into the door frame, brow furrowed.

"You don't have to pretend like everything is fine. Like your time with Schlatt—" he hates the way he flinches, the way he can't stop himself. "—didn't have its repercussions. You don't have to limit yourself to being happy, or snarky, or anything else that you've deemed as *yourself*. You can be a complex person with complex thoughts and conflicting feelings. You don't have to decide how you think or feel about *anything*."

"You don't ever have to pretend to be something you're not. You want to know something?" He's not sure he does, but he doesn't think that's going to stop Wilbur. "It doesn't *matter* whether or not you broke the red wall. Not if you don't want it to." His breath is coming shorter now, tight and fast in his chest. "And you can keep locking yourself in your room for the rest of time, if that's what you need."

"But I'm *here* for you, Toms. Always. As long as you need me, I will be here. I'll sit outside this door for days, and I'll feed your raccoons for years, and I'll keep talking for entire lifetimes, Toms, if that's what it takes for you to understand."

"Because being a person?" Wilbur laughs, slight and bitter. "That's fucking scary. Learning how to live without someone telling you what to do or where to go is so fucking hard, and humans have years of gradually developing their freedom before they ever master it. If they

ever do. Life is so unfair, Toms, and it's thrown you, a veritable fucking child—" he can picture the gestures he must be making, the expression on his face, and it makes some familiar warmth suffuse through his veins. "—into adulthood without so much as an information pamphlet.

"God knows I can't be of any help here. I can't provide emotional competence when I have none, and I can't offer advice when I don't know what to do or how to live in a way that isn't inherently self-destructive. I can't do much of anything other than sit here as a perfect example that you don't have to have it figured out. You don't have to be good or bad, and you definitely don't have to be perfect. I've fucked up more than enough for a lifetime, but I'm still here. And so are you."

Tommy swallows around the lump in his throat, around the gaping hole in his heart. It feels like the edges of it are still raw, but also like sand is pouring over those edges. Like the bottom of the basin is being filled up, just the slightest bit. Like some indescribable thing inside him—that he didn't know where to even *begin* to fix it—is being soothed.

"You stayed, even through the worst of. So don't think, for even a *single second*, that I won't return the favor."

"I don't even know where to start," Tommy breathes, voice soft and stuck in the back of his raw throat. "I don't even know what I am."

"I could give two fucks about that," Wilbur spits, surprisingly vicious. It startles Tommy enough to shake the cloying self-deprecation and crippling doubt off, if only for a moment. To unstick their claws from the rubber-lined wires and blinking chips that make up his brain. "I've never needed you to be anything other than yourself. Be as confused as you need to be."

"You're here, and I'm here. The rest of it will fall into place."

Tommy leans back, head thunking against the door with an audible noise that reverberates through the back of his skull. He centers himself around the sound of Wilbur breathing, on the rise and fall of his own chest as it automatically syncs to his. *The rest of it will fall into place.*

Wilbur starts humming then, maybe to soothe the silence, maybe because that's just *who he is*. He's lilting melodies and a caffeinated buzz, loud laughter and eye bags, and so, so much more. It takes a minute for Tommy to recognize the song, but when he does, the tension perpetually caught in his shoulders—in his heart—eases.

"*Maybe I'll find mine's a nightmare*," Wilbur sings, low and lonely without the backdrop of his guitar. The words stick to Tommy's skin regardless, like syrup raindrops. Like the salty tears that blur his own eyes. "*But I don't even care. I just want to live inside my own...*"

Tommy goes over everything he knows, everything he thought he knew, everything he doesn't know now. He tries to find connections where he knows there are none, and he tries to form new synapses in a brain that has no synapses. He finds it's as complexly simple as this: he doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know how to live without objectives, how to stop

pretending to be something other than what he might possibly be. He doesn't know what to do, and that scares him so badly, scares him every day of this new pitiful existence.

But, he thinks as he lets out a shuddery breath, the week-long tension leaving him slumped over against the doorframe, it might not matter. He slips his fingers underneath the space below the door and finds Wilbur's easily. They twitch in surprise but remain still as Tommy sticks his pinkie out and wraps it around Wilbur's.

As long as he has Wilbur, he thinks it might be worth it to figure it out.

"...dream."

The day the real break-through happens—although Tommy didn't, *couldn't*, realize how important it would be at the time—is truly nothing special. The day had already slipped by, spent in small pockets of time with Niki, who had taken to perfecting her donut recipe. Tommy found it endlessly interesting to watch; the little half-spheres of dough puffing up in the boiling oil, as well as their hasty retreat whenever Niki tried to spoon them up onto a paper towel covered plate. Wilbur had come home to them like that, huddled together, backs bent over the deep pot as they watched the dough rise, as they smelt the sickly sweet stench and tried, in vain, to taste it on their tongues.

Tommy had retreated soon after that. It had become a trend lately; he could only spend a few minutes in Wilbur's presence before it became...

Not too much. Those aren't the right words; they don't fit into his chest, into the gaping, empty hole in his gut. It's not too much to be around Wilbur, it never is. It's just—

Tommy doesn't know. More and more often, he's lost to a pit of confusion. The right words seem to slip right past him, not even touching his skin for a few brief moments of clarity. It seems so stupid and silly to say he doesn't know—it seems to be his catchphrase recently, even within the safety of his own thoughts—but that's all he has to say.

In the end, it doesn't matter. Tommy still retreats, as he always does, back into Fundy's room. He sits on the bed, head propped up against the cold window, the curtains pulled around him until it creates a kind of gauzy, protective veil. He watches as the last of the dying sunlight fades from the sky and as the night claims the land with dark, rolling clouds.

He doesn't know what compels him to leave once more—only that he does. He sits up with a sudden urgency, parts the veil with dismissive, jerky hands, and marches forward with surprisingly purposeful steps.

He finds Niki and Wilbur, as he so often does, on the couch. They're watching... something—his unfocused eyes skip past the TV, and, anyway, what they're watching is unimportant—and Tommy loiters in the hallway. He takes silent steps, avoiding the creaky ones that he knows

better than even the back of his hand. He stops just behind the couch, staring at the backs of their heads.

He tries to imagine what expressions fill their faces. He wonders if they're interested in what it is they're watching. If they're content with the quiet peace of the house, or if they miss him. They're sitting on either ends of the couch, leaving the perfect, Tommy-shaped vacancy between them. He wonders if that's due to a battered hope he might join them or some half-buried instinct—the memory of him not lost to their hindbrains.

He wonders which is more meaningful.

Tommy doesn't have to continue—not when they're both so unaware of his hovering presence. He does, anyway.

Wilbur doesn't startle as Tommy comes around the edge of the couch and into his visual field, but it's a near thing. He blinks rapidly, eyes tracking Tommy's slow movement with a certain kind of hunger. It takes another moment of blank shock—long after he has sunk down in that perfect, Tommy-shaped space—before he smiles. It's slow and curling and so fucking *consuming*. It lights up his entire face. It crinkles his eyes. It makes him look five years younger.

Nobody says anything. Not Tommy, as he settles into the crack of the couch, his head propped up by the mushy, beloved cushions behind him. Not Niki, as she scoots tentatively closer, allowing their arms to brush—the subtlest hint of her solid presence. And certainly not Wilbur, as he wordlessly reaches for the remote and switches their nameless program to Up.

They spend the rest of the movie in a comfortable silence; Tommy slowly lets his body unfold, the tight ball he'd curled himself into unfurling until his knees are overlapping with theirs.

After that, it's like a dam breaking open in a vicious explosion of concrete chunks, sharp fragments, and gushing water. Life keeps on moving forward, only now it feels like Tommy is finally moving with it, rather than feeling the drag of salt water and sand around him. Rather than stand, helpless, as his feet are cemented into the ground. Life keeps moving forward, but it changes, too.

Niki purchases a little planter box that she sits in the windowsill. It's still too cold to plant anything in the frost-covered yard—the dirt too hard and unyielding—but it seems she was serious when she intended to help him find a new purpose. She installs it in the kitchen, in the window that hovers above the dining table that gets sun nearly all day long in the winter.

Together, they dig up dirt from the backyard, borrowed beanies pulled low over their heads to hid their LEDs from any wandering eyes. It nearly hides their own, the edge of it sticking to their eyelashes and making it hard to see what they're doing. They try to stifle their laughter, lest any neighbors see, but that only makes it funnier, and then they're laughing, loud and crippling; they have to lean into each other to avoid falling over, and, even then, it's a close thing.

Wilbur comes home to the smell of fresh earth filling his home, to dirtied fingers and rosy cheeks as Tommy proudly shows off their work. It doesn't look like much, just a few mounds of dirt with a couple inches separating them. But within a few weeks, they'll be sprouts of basil plants.

That night, Wilbur consumes his dinner amongst their excited chatter, talking about everything and nothing. When he finishes, they spread out a large sheet of musty paper—found somewhere in the attic—onto the carpeted floor, using a few pieces of lumpy cardboard as a base to avoid poking the pencil through. Together, bellies on the floor, feet kicking up in the air, for some of them—*Wilbur*—and heads bowed over the page, they come up with a recreation of the backyard. They imagine what could be: wooden plants fenced in dark soil, slabs of rugged stone as steps with moss growing the spaces between them, shaped patches of fertile dirt in the ground.

A box off the beaten path, filled with all the weeds that never got to grow. Dandelions and tangled chickweed and ivy—anything and everything that people won't allow in their pristine, prissy gardens.

None of them are artists. Niki and Tommy are the closest things since they have perfection built into their systems. But Tommy doesn't have the patience to trace out every line, and Niki doesn't have the desire to rely so readily on her system. So Niki traces shaky lines on Tommy's orders, and Wilbur keeps them entertained with stories of work and his youth.

By the time they've finished drawing up plans for spring, they're exhausted. Tommy's head is drooping, chin digging into his palm as he desperately tries to prop his head up. His eyes are fluttering shut, body craning into Wilbur's shoulder to absorb his warmth. Wilbur is humming softly under his breath, folding and smoothing out the corner tip of the page. Only Niki is left working, tongue sticking out every so slightly. When she finally finishes, she tilts her head, narrows her eyes, and smooths her hands out over the page.

It's messy and amateurish, but it's theirs.

All three of them forgo their separate sleeping arrangements, choosing instead to pile in on the couch. Niki's elbows dig into his gut, and Wilbur's chin is a dagger against his shoulder, but Tommy is so stupidly pleased. His LED flickers so bright, and Wilbur grumbles his sleepy protests, smothering him with a pillow while Tommy shrieks with laughter.

It's just one of the many nights filled with the bubbling, sticky affection growing, like bacteria, between them. With wide smiles splitting their faces, their joy so infectious that it has them ducking their heads, knocking shoulders into one another until they nearly fall.

Niki and Wilbur take to dancing in the kitchen while Wilbur cooks dinner. Tommy always chooses the song, therefore setting the mood for what kind of night it will be. Sometimes, he feels somber, brought low and melancholic by memories of Schlatt or reminders of everything that has happened. And so he chooses something sweet and slow, and Niki and Wilbur slow dance. Niki's forehead will rest on Wilbur's shoulder, and Wilbur's other hand will wrap around her waist, and Tommy will watch them glide across the kitchen floor where Wilbur once passed out amongst spilled wine and shattered glass.

Other nights, Tommy will be biting back a smile that seems to big for the rest of the world, teeth gouging into his bottom lip. It doesn't hide it, never completely, and he'll catch Wilbur's pleased, content looks as he chops vegetables on a worn cutting board. On those nights, he plays sickly sweet songs with beats that reverberate through the house into their skulls, in tandem with their hearts. On those nights, Wilbur will spin Niki around until they're both breathless with laughter, until neither one of them can see straight. Tommy yells the lyrics until he's breathless, until he has no choice but to abandon his post by the record player to join in, jumping in without rhythm or finesse.

They find their footing, slowly but surely, and they fall into new domestic routines. Tommy makes a simple breakfast for Wilbur—when he's still grumpy and tired from sleep—while Niki puts together his lunch. Niki and Tommy will spend their days doing whatever they do—exploring the wonderful world of pay-per-view movies and reading all the books in the house and making plant charts in anticipation of the first thaw. Wilbur gets home, still buzzing from his afternoon coffee, and they'll talk while he rests on the couch. Eventually, he'll drag himself up to cook dinner, and Tommy will parse through the collection.

Niki also starts compiling the shopping lists, and her words is law. Wilbur is not allowed to deviate—*hah*—from it.

It's a safeguard all three of them came up with the last time Wilbur came home with a pack of beer bottles in hand, and Tommy had frozen, eyes stuck on the way light shone through them and breath stolen from his lungs. Wilbur didn't even want to buy it; he was a sober again, which is—and always will be—an achievement.

(Tommy may have newer, worse associations with alcohol that limit his ability to be there for Wilbur in that way, but that doesn't mean he's any less proud, no matter how often he slips up.)

Progress isn't linear, Wilbur often says. They're Puffy's stolen words—he did eventually return to therapy, based on prodding from Niki on Tommy's behalf—and he says them more often than not, a dull reminder when he feels like shit for slipping up again. He's trying, though, and that's all that matters.

So now Niki writes the grocery lists with input from both of them, and Wilbur is not allowed to buy anything off the list. It's frustrating, at times, since—as Wilbur complains frequently—it makes him feel like a child, incapable of self-control and no longer the manifester of his own destiny. (He likes to buy a pack of Twizzlers that they strategically put by the check-out lines and has not stopped throwing tantrums since Niki keeps refusing to put them on the lists.)

But it's the one rule set in stone, unbent and unbroken since they put it in place. One allowance means the rule is nothing but arbitrary, and Wilbur wants, so very badly, to never again trigger that prey instinct that had frozen Tommy in place.

Time keeps on slipping past. Eventually, Niki gets tired of seeing Tommy braced on the counter, chin propped up against his interlocked fingers as he watches the basil's slow growth, perceptible only to his zoomed-in vision. Instead, she drags him from the exposed window, from the soft sunlight filtering in, and the dust dancing along the sill, and positions

him in the kitchen. She gives him yet another purpose then—a sole task that Tommy can't bring himself to add to the blank list in the corner of his vision.

Get better at cooking.

It seems daunting, and even Niki's many lessons don't seem to make a dent in the massive wall that is his incompetence. Wilbur watches, sometimes, on some of the few times they host their lessons during his day off. He tries to smother his laughter in his palm, but it never quite works, and it always distracts Tommy enough—who always stops what he's doing to scowl at Wilbur—that he ends up burning something.

Niki's face always spasms, oscillating wildly and indecisively between laughter and disapproval. It always ends the same, though; she kicks Wilbur out of the kitchen, brandishing a rolling pin like she's planning on whacking him with it.

Without his watchful eye and soundtrack of poorly stifled giggles, the lessons do go a little better. At the very least, Tommy avoids any major catastrophes. He learns how not to burn food with consistency, and—when Niki finds out how little the cooking process holds his attention, how his eyes inevitably wander to something more interesting—he learns tips and tricks and the hidden rules of cooking.

She teaches him never to feed a human raw eggs or raw flour. Apparently, flour needs to be cooked and never eaten raw, lest there be disastrous consequences. The chance, of course, of contracting *E. coli* from raw flour is very small, but Niki comments on the oddity of humans, as she so frequently does. How they fear, with more certainty, the unusual and rare events in life—shark attacks and murderers and airplane accidents—and yet, she muses with a wrinkled nose, they willingly hop into cars.

Tommy thinks it's special. He thinks the fear of the unlikely as well as the lack of fear in the face of the common is so *human*. He thinks they're silly and stupid, but they're also so themselves. Unapologetic and unabashed.

Niki is... bitter, he finds. It's something unavoidable, in her situation. She knows nothing good of humans, save for Wilbur's tentative affection that morphed in a sturdy, loyal friendship. She's been beat and nearly killed, locked up with the threat of imminent death hanging over her head, and she has watched as they eagerly fight against the freedom and rights that would come with the revolution. She knows them only as abusers, jailers, overlords.

She has nothing but suspicious looks and a curled-up lip that bares her teeth for humanity. She doesn't hate them, not fully, but she's tried and bitter and she wants nothing to do with them, other than to snatch her rights from their clenched fists.

And Tommy can understand that, in the faint, distant way that people can understand others. He only hopes that he can help her acclimate in all the ways she's helped him. He hopes, one day, she can see what he sees, that she can learn how to co-exist with humanity instead of wishing for a society split away from them.

He understands, though. He almost always does.

It's all been leading up to this, he thinks as he watches his reflection in the mirror, his serious face hovering over Niki's shoulder. He'd have to be blind to miss the growing restlessness in Niki, as well as the way she paused when encountering every reflective surface, inspecting her dull hair. Over the past week, he had watched too many times as she ran her fingers through it, occasionally pulling on it like she wanted to rip it right out of her scalp.

It doesn't come to a surprise to him, then, that they're here now: crowded into the bathroom, positioned in front of the sink with a pair of scissors sitting, innocuously, on the rim of the sink. Niki's eyes are wide as she leans forward, tilting her head back and forth as she takes in her pale face. She tugs on the sturdy ends of her hair, taking the time to brush it out for the fifth time, straightening out non-existent curls. Meanwhile, Tommy stands behind her, a looming skeleton in Wilbur's baggy sweatshirt and pants.

"Okay," she says, quietly, to herself. Her hip is digging into the porcelain lip of the sink, and she uses it for balance as she reaches for the scissors. Taking a strand of dirty blonde hair between pinched fingers, she considers it, it's weight, it's length, the thick, individual follicles of hair.

Then, unceremoniously, she closes the scissors around it with a decisive 'snip'. The strand flutters, and they both watch as it lands along the faucet of the sink and blends in with the floor. There's a moment of almost comical silence—the stillness before the storm, ripe with all the crackling electricity and tension of budding grey clouds.

Niki breaks it once again, fisting a handful of hair and chopping at random.

It truly is a sight to behold; distantly, Tommy is glad that he decided to loiter outside the open bathroom door when he passed by and caught her lingering in front of the mirror. He watches in something that could be—can only be—awe as she saws through chunk after chunk of long blonde hair without care; she tosses handfuls away from her, inattentive to where they fall. Onto the floor, on the rim of the sink, gathering in the wet basin of the sink, sticking to the sides. Her eyes are locked onto her own reflection, on her own stilling hands, and on her hair, which now falls just under her chin.

It's choppy and uneven, but when she runs a hand through it—drawing out razor sharp but tiny strands of cut hair—it looks artfully messy. Purposeful. Imperfect, but all the better for the half-hearted layers that add texture and volume; for the crooked curtain bangs that tickle her eyebrows.

It's easy, as an android, to match perfection, he thinks. They're built with sensors in their eyes and computers in their brain; all too easily, measurements and angles pop up in their vision, even with no commands to rule their systems.

But something about this—the unevenness of freshly chopped hair, cut in a moment of impulsivity and restless passion—reeks of humanity.

She reaches up, fingernails scratching over her scalp with a hum. As he watches, color bursts out from the base of her skull in a magnetic ripple of pink that only ends once it reaches the newly chopped tips of her hair. Niki stares into the mirror, eyes wide and mouth open just a little bit; Tommy cannot, for the life of him, sort out what it means. What the new and slight furrow to her brow means, or the way her fingers slowly reach up, touching her LED for a moment before skirting away. As if she was burned.

"What do you think?" she asks, finally tearing her eyes away from the mirror to bestow their intensity upon him.

Tommy blinks, then smiles, as bright and comforting as he possibly can. "It looks good." He reaches out, brushing some more the fine strands from her shoulders. They both watch as they flutter to the ground. "Much more..." he falters. "Badass."

A smile breaks through the odd, intense, unplaceable expression. "Badass?" she turns back to the mirror, tilting her head. Her hair swishes, but doesn't fall in the overwhelming curtain it once was. With this, her newly shortened hair, she can no longer hide. It won't cover her face anymore, not even the bangs that she tries to tuck behind her ears. She smiles anyway. "I like it," she decides.

"Good. That was the whole purpose, wasn't it?"

The moment feels suspended in time. In here, he can't hear the ticking of the kitchen clock, nor the sound of the wind prying at the house. The sensations are dulled—limited only to the brush of Niki's system when their shoulders touch, the press of the toilet against the back of his knees, and the obnoxious flickering lights above the mirror that wash them in pale, artificial light. It feels like a picture, a little blurry and out of focus—the lights are but bright, blinding smudges—and tucked away in a spot of honor, like a well-worn wallet or in a cracked picture frame on the wall.

Niki turns back to the mirror, fingers teasing along the edges of her fringe. Her fingers bump the edge of her LED, circling a considering yellow. She turns her head, tilting her jaw up. The pads of her fingers press against her temple, the skin retracting under her force. Tommy watches with a furrowed brow as she frowns, fingernail tracing along the edge. Before he can even open his mouth to ask questions, she's grabbing the scissors again and prying her LED off with the metal tip of the scissors. It hooks underneath and, with a snap of her wrist, it drops into the sink with a faint noise.

There's nothing but the sound of Niki's ragged breaths, her chest heaving as she stares, wide-eyed, at her reflection. The skin slowly regrows in a shimmering wave, and once it covers over the offensively blank temple, she looks...

Human.

Her short hair that doesn't even brush her shoulders, the bangs that fall into her eyes with annoyingly endearing frequency, the pink that surrounds her head like a halo... all of it is so egregiously human.

She turns to him, scissors still brandished in her clenched hand. If not like a weapon, then something similarly threatening. Instinctively, he takes a step back. It feels off-balance, fine strands of hair grinding against the floor underneath his socks and stealing his traction. A hand comes up to cover is LED, which is blinking like the flashing lights at any club. The harsh lines of her face—of her angular jaw and her sharp eyes and the determined set of her brows—soften.

"I'm not going to hurt you," she says, mouth pulled into a frown. Her hand droops a little, leaving the scissors pointed at his thirium pump instead of his LED. For some reason, it eliminates some of the tension in his body. "I'd never—" she sighs, pressing her lips together. "You can't keep it, Tommy."

"Why not?"

"Because... it's one of the many symbols given to us by human beings to distinguish us. To set us apart from them." Niki scowls. "To mark us as different, as inferior. It marks us as androids."

Tommy's chest heaves. His hand presses further against his temple. "*We are* androids."

"Of course we are! But we're so much more than that, as well, and if all they ever see is the spinning light on our heads, they'll never be able to see us as anything else. We'll always just be machines to them. Made to serve them." There's a frightening scowl on her face; her eyes are clouded, as they so often are, with bitter thoughts of an uneducated humanity.

She takes a step forward. Tommy takes a step back. "Besides, you can't go outside with that thing. It's not safe."

"Who says I plan on going outside?"

Niki scoffs. "You'll stay in here? You'll make this place your sickly tomb?"

"Hey—" Tommy makes a mangled noise, caught somewhere between a laugh and an exhale.

She continues, unperturbed by his resistance. She's nearly backed him out of the bathroom, by now; his shoulder brushes against the wooden frame of the door. He wishes it could be as easy as stepping out and retreating back to the room that's been bestowed on him, but they've been on such precarious footing as of late. And Niki always looks so pleased whenever Tommy deigns to step foot into the rest of the house. Right now, as he balances on the precipice between the bathroom and the hallway, he tries to decide which is worse: this Niki, with her intense eyes and her new, choppy hair, or a one who tries to hide the look of sad disappointment.

After a moment too long, he still can't decide which is worse.

Niki stills, and the sudden change of pace does little to settle his heart. They remain in some kind of stand-off; Tommy, with his fingers pressed in protection over his LED, and Niki, with all the fury of a charging bull. Then, she says, "I'm not going to—I won't..." a shuddery breath leaves her. "I'm not like *them*," she says instead, leaving no uncertainty to who the

'them' it is she refers to. Tommy slowly lowers his hand. "But Tommy, please at least humor me."

She takes steps backwards until she's crowded in the back of the bathroom, the back of her shins pressed against the ceramic of the bathtub. Wordlessly, Tommy follows until he's standing in front of the mirror. He breathes, and Niki breathes, and for a good while, the only sound, the only movement, is their breath stirring the air.

He can't quite explain what compels his chest to rise and fall, other than the slight, irrational buzz in his skin if he goes far too long without it. Technically speaking, breathing, for androids, is a mechanism meant to regulate their internal temperature. It is necessary, but only in the barest sense of the word; an android without breath could run for days, weeks even, before their system began to overheat.

For Tommy, now, standing in a too-small bathroom with the weight of Niki's gaze settling on him, it takes only a dozen seconds before the panic begins to set in.

So he breathes in, long and slow and deep, and he holds it in his expanded chest for as long as he can. And when he exhales at last, he looks up into his pale reflection with a determined set to his jaw.

He expected something to change, he realizes after he's been staring, uncomprehending, at his expression. For the events over the past month or so to catch up to him. For his skin to be marked with unsightly color, for his skin to be scored in some way that would deem him... broken. Dysfunctional. He expected something of his physicality to reflect his interior.

It doesn't. He looks the same, albeit, much sadder, if that can even be said. There are no lines to his face, and yet he looks wearier. Older, somehow, despite the pristine lift of his plastic skin. He is as he always was; as he'll always be, likely. Alabaster skin, blonde hair curled around his head in something resembling a halo, blue eyes, a straight nose. An LED on his forehead.

He shakes his head before he even realizes he's shaking it. "I can't."

Out of the corner of his eye, he catches her expression twist. "I don't *understand* you," she says, not out of malice or anger, but a deep, sorrowful frustration. "I don't—"

There are many, many reasons. Many he could say. Many he could give. Many that could appease her, if only a little. Enough to give him the space for his chest to expand fully, for air to enter his lungs unbidden with the weight of her expectations.

He's an android. He's not meant to remove his LED. It's against the law. It's a helpful signal to humans as to his status. It lights up a dark room, if only enough for him and Wilbur to see.

So many valid reasons, and yet...

Tommy swallows around the lump in his throat, eyes blurred and locked onto his sorry reflection. "I don't know who I am without it. I don't know what I am."

So many valid reasons, but this is the only one that truly matters. Because this has been his constant companion, older even than his name or his model number. It's been with him as long as he's been alive. To get rid of it, to pry it out of his skin and toss it aside so carelessly, is a betrayal.

There are few things afforded to him that are truly *his*, few things that are unique to him and him alone. His skin, his hair, his body, even his very *system*—the code running him—is borrowed and unremarkable. He looks at his face—rare and different as it is—and sees nothing but another android amongst the masses. A soldier meant for nothing more than following orders and waging war.

But beneath his skin there are marks that no one else has; marks of his foes and his friends. Pale, silvery scars and dimpled dents and gaping holes in his goddamn hands. Those are *his*, like nothing else is, and, although all androids are built with an LED embedded in his forehead, this one is *his* as well.

His fingers ghost over his spiraling, yellow LED, pressing his thumb over it until the light disappears. He tries to picture what he'd look like without it, and finds that he can't. That he doesn't want to.

When he turns to face Niki, he finds that all trace of her previous mania is gone. She is solemn and serious, and when she steps forward with purpose, Tommy lets her. She pushes into his space, the tips of her toes nearly touching his.

Niki reaches out with a bare palm, and he meets her. As always, the flow of information that passes freely between their systems is overwhelming. He feels what she feels, and he feels what he feels, and it all blends and muddles together until they're breathing the same air, living the same lives. It's connection in its purest and simplest form—no words or thoughts needed, just understanding without misinterpretation. It's hell.

It's bliss.

Niki hunches over, fingers tracing his palm, along the ugly scar in the center. They follow the path, trailing along unblemished skin to reach the scratches around his knuckles, on the tips of his fingers, up his forearm and towards the bigger, more meaningful marks. She pauses when she reaches the scratches along his arm, her expression considering. Her fingernails dip into the grooves of the mark—the only evidence that Stella ever existed.

And when she looks up at him, it's with a sure smile. "You're Tommy," she says, as if that explains everything. "With or without it, with or without these marks, you'll never stop being Tommy."

Somehow, impossibly, it does explain everything.

She reaches up then, fingers circling the edges of his LED. He tenses up despite himself, despite his impossible trust in her. "I can't say I understand you, not fully. Not in the way you need me to." Her hand slides down, fitting his cheek into her palm so easily as she smiles so warm. "You are so very singular, Tommy. So different from myself. I could never hope to

understand you." Her thumb skitters across his skin, sending a wave of further connection, of her melancholy. "But, for you, I would try."

Tommy's next breath shudders in his chest. "I'm sorry," he says.

"For what?"

He doesn't respond.

For everything. For his aversion to androids, and for the months Niki was locked away in a cell. For his distance, and for the times when he couldn't keep it up, when he sought out her company selfishly, because basking in her smile never failed to make him feel, at least, the tiniest bit better.

Niki slides into the miniscule space between him and the toilet, her head poking out above his shoulder as she positions him in front of the mirror. They stand like that, staring into their reflections, before she reaches out. "What a handsome young man," she coos, pinching his cheek.

The moment shatters, and Tommy smiles. "Eugh," he says, batting her hand away from him. She laughs, high and lilting, and though he feels an answer to her call deep within him, he settles for smoothing out his LED until the pale yellow settles back into blue. He again tries to picture what he would look like without it; another fresh-faced college kid with too much baby fat, probably. Too young and too old at the same time, with dark circles and lines around the edges of his eyes that betray his experience. Just another human, as ordinary and unremarkable as anyone.

He drops his hand. His LED winks back up at him, entirely too comforting in its presence.

He is what he is, and he is what he was, and he is what he'll always be; and there's some comfort in that thought. That no matter what happens—if his LED gets ripped out of his head, if his very code breaks down, if his system rebels—he is, and always will be, an android. Maybe it shouldn't be, after all that's happened, after all he's been through and done, after the shards of red glass on the floor of his mind. But it is. There's nothing much he can do to change that.

Tommy doesn't know how long they stand in silence, Niki's hands on his shoulders; their attention is directed in two very different ways, although they both gaze at their own reflections in contemplation. Eventually, Niki's hands slide away from him. She sits down on the closed toilet lid, one leg tucked against her chest. Her eyes, when he looks, are vacant.

"Tommy," she says with a sudden gravity that outweighs even everything that came before. It's silent then, her expression twisting and crumpling and changing as she supposedly searches for words that only evade her. "Tommy," she says again, helplessly. "I think... I need to leave."

Tommy blinks rapidly. "What? Why?" he turns on his heel to look at her, not her solemn face in the mirror. "Where—where would you even go?"

It's a long time coming. Deep in his gut, deep in his mind, he knows this. Niki is wild and free and unbreakable; she can't be confined to a cage, not even one as pretty and gilded as this one. He knows this. He *does*.

It doesn't change the fact that Wilbur's house without Niki is unthinkable, that his side without her is impossible. Somehow, it's stopped being Wilbur and Tommy and started being Wilbur and Tommy and Niki.

Niki doesn't meet his gaze. Maybe that should've raised alarm bells in his mind—along with the guilty twist to her mouth. Maybe it should've given him some kind of indication of what's to come.

It doesn't. The words, when Niki finally speak them, still come as a shock. "I'm going to Tubbo. I'm going to join the other deviants."

"You're going to—" all the breath seeps out of him until his chest is deflated. "*What?*"

Her gaze lingers somewhere on the tile of the shower wall, on the dirty grout the connects them. "I can't stay here, Tommy," she says, resting her chin on her propped up knee. "Did you honestly think I would stay here forever? Hiding away while the rest of our people fight and die for us?"

Our people.

Tommy swallows around the lump in his throat. "I didn't really..."

She glances up at him then, the crinkles around her eyes soft and... not quite pitying but something similar. Something that closes his throat. "I can't stay trapped in here, always scared of someone walking in the door at the wrong time. I can't be so—so... *stationary*." Her hands gesture wildly, her glazed eyes lock onto something over his shoulder. "I can't live off of someone else to survive, not again. I can't waste away while deviants are being shot in the streets. I refuse to be a bystander."

Tommy flinches and drops his gaze.

"I didn't mean—" Niki sighs and leans forward, her hand coming up to take his. Her skin peels away. Tommy's doesn't. "I don't want to live like that. If we want freedom, we have to fight for it."

"But why do *you* have to help?" he asks, sounding small and pitiful and childish. "Why can't it be someone else?"

There are lines on her face. Deep and ingrained, sorrowful and somber, and terribly, horribly *tired*. "Who else will?" Tommy doesn't respond. "Somebody has to. Why can't it be me?"

Only then is Tommy aware of how sharp his breath is in his throat, how fast his chest expands and deflates. He shakes his head, eyes roving the space as if deviants will start popping out of the grout lines, willing to die for the cause instead of Niki. His fingers itch,

twitching for a coin that no longer fills his pocket. Lost along the way, in a time and place Tommy can't even remember. "What about RA9?"

Niki's face twists into something indescribable. "RA9 doesn't fucking exist, Tommy." Tommy shakes his head instinctively, frantically. His curls bounce out of place, sticking to his forehead and his eyebrows, the tips of his hair nearly poking his eyes. He's never been a staunch believer in RA9's so-called existence, but to hear it denounced so easily...

A name carved in so many different walls. A statuette crudely formed, placed on the ground with fresh flowers and flickering candles. An android, dying on the ground, her hand wrapped around his wrist, her glossy eyes seeing through him to something bigger.

Niki shakes her head. "Or if it does, it sure as hell isn't doing anything to help. It just sits back as its people cry out for mercy, for salvation, and it does *nothing*." Her chest heaves, her panting breath the only sound. "It does nothing to help. But Tubbo does." She ducks her head suddenly so it's in his line of sight and meets his distracted gaze. "And you do."

"Me?" He frowns.

"Yes you." She holds out a hand, slipping hers into his when he doesn't immediately reach out to take it. "How many deviants have you saved?" Her gaze is piercing, stripping back the layers of his skin. He fights the instinct to run and loses, although her hand in his keeps him in place. "More than RA9, that's for sure. And in your position? That's pretty fucking brave."

Tommy yanks his hand from hers. "I *let* two deviants escape when I was *supposed* to catch them. That's not—I didn't want to let them go. Wilbur talked me into it."

"You still did it. No matter the motivation, three deviants are alive right now because of you."

He stills, brow furrowing. For a moment, he stares at the door. It's still wide open, warm and inviting with its golden light and the promise of escape. He could walk out right now and be free from this conversation.

Tommy swallows down the prey instinct. "Three?" He glances at Niki from the sides of his eyes.

She doesn't respond.

Somehow, despite everything still left unsaid between them, it feels like a door slamming shut. Like his last chance to flee from the vulnerability and the silent understanding of this relationship is past now. Like they both know that Tommy will do anything for his people. His family.

He sighs, long drawn out and with his eyes squeezed shut. When he opens them, he laughs—a surprised, harsh sound—at what he finds.

In the corner of his vision, sitting neatly in his system's hub, in the place marked out for his objectives—which has gone frustratingly unused since his separation from Schlatt—is one

task: *find the location of the deviant leader.*

Chapter End Notes

I love chickweed. I love it so much. If you have not seen a picture of it, I'd highly recommend. It's so pretty and it creates this green, soft carpet. I have such a soft spot for weeds and other uncontrollable plants.

Originally, I intended not to write the escape scene from either Niki or Tommy's perspective and just have it remain slightly unclear how they escaped while Wilbur was silently freaking out over their well-being. But then as I was finishing this chapter up and getting ready to post it, I was assaulted with the image of Tommy posing as a janitor like Markus does in that one scene, and it really stuck with me. I'm glad I changed it, even if it delayed getting this out. It was a pretty fun scene to write.

freshet

Chapter Summary

In the end, all good things must come to an end. But dawn is on the horizon, and so is spring.

Chapter Notes

TW: unspecified stabbing, graphic descriptions of android gore

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Freshet

Going out in the dead of night in a city growing in hostility to track down deviants that just *might* know the location of the deviant rebellion headquarters is a bad idea. It's a colossally bad idea, and Tommy wants to protest at the thought of it so badly. But, it's the only one they have. Neither of them have any idea where it might be, and it's not like they can use police or Cyberlife's resources to help find it.

So Tommy and Niki choose freezing nights in the vain hope it might lessen the chances of running across humans. They pull knit hats low over their heads and head out to spend a few hours scouring the streets. Neither of them know where to find deviants—Niki knows so few, and Tommy is *Tommy*—so they stick to the shadowy alleyways and loiter around android parking stations.

Suffice to say, the first few nights of this go poorly. They return back home with frozen fingers and blue cheeks that sell them out. After that, they start wrapping themselves up in thick scarves to hide the worst of the color.

"No," Tommy states after a week of turning up nothing. They're standing on the corner of two streets under the dull glow of a dying street lamp—it keeps flickering and shorting out for a few seconds, and it reminds Tommy of some of the shitty detective novels he reads over Wilbur's shoulder. The ground is lined with frost and a thin layer of snow that crunches underfoot and holds onto the impression of their incriminating footsteps. Niki gives him a look—a 'this is the best idea we have, and you're just being stubborn' look, which is, unfortunately, becoming more and more common nowadays. "No, Niki."

"Come on! We're never going to find anything this way. If we split up, we can cover more ground—"

"We can reduce our numbers and make it easier to pick us off."

"Our numbers? There are two of us. It's not like we're a trained squad or anything." She settles her hands on her hips, and Tommy scowls at how effectively it makes him want to cower before her. "If somebody wanted to pick us off, they wouldn't have a very hard time with it—"

"Comforting, truly," he deadpans.

"And anyway, it's unlikely anyone will recognize us. Your face hasn't been seen except by a select number of people, and I look much different now. And we've come across like five people. We'll cover more ground, find the information we're looking for, and leave much quicker." She shakes out her hands, the tips of which are turning faintly blue. "Don't tell me you want to stay out here? It's freezing."

He frowns. "No, but—"

She fixes him with a pointed look. "I can take care of myself."

"I know that!" he bristles. "Maybe I want us to stick together for *my* safety, huh? Did you ever consider that?"

Niki laughs and pats his cheek. It's tinged with a little bit of condescension that Tommy ignores. "It's about covering ground," she says again, and Tommy can feel himself caving, his strong opinions grumbling to dust in his hands.

Splitting up is an even worse idea than roaming the city in the dead of night. But despite the lurch in his gut—he can't even think about his new *status* without flinching away from the thoughts; how is he supposed to interact with deviants as easily as this will require?—he knows, as soon as Niki fixes him with that smile, he's going to agree.

It's something about Niki, and the hope in every line of her face. He's made her and Wilbur's happiness his new mission, and this is, unfortunately, vitally important to it.

They split up shortly after that, despite the way Tommy's hand clings to whatever part of her he can reach, and soon enough, he's alone. The city is daunting without the use of a car, the buildings tall and looming above him.

He watches the tops of them as he winds between them, eyes finding the path he'd chased that one deviant—Rupert—across the roofs. He wonders how he's doing nowadays. If he joined up with Tubbo. If he returned to that infested apartment after enough time. If the pigeons he took care of are alright. If he was one of the deviants shot down in a protest, thirium spilling out and staining the streets.

The streets are dark and foggy, nearly abandoned due to the time and the temperature. He can feel it even through the thick sweater and the layers beneath it. It burns his face and he nestles

further into the scarf to avoid the blue tinge he will undoubtedly take.

He feels out of place walking along slick sidewalks; the collar of Wilbur's jacket is propped up to protect his vulnerable neck from the cold like he imagines a human might do. The beanie is pulled low over his head, hiding his LED from sight.

Keeping an LED is proving to be more dangerous than he thought. He doesn't regret it, not one bit, but it's becoming more dangerous to be an android, let alone a deviant. Like Techno said, support for the deviants' cause is growing, but so is the opposition, in violence as well as vocality. Androids are being destroyed in the streets, dumped into trash heaps, sent back to the factories where they came from. There's growing talk of rounding up androids in camps.

It's a whole conundrum. Even if people aren't totally against the idea of android rights, nobody wants to deal with the threat of their android killing them. There's a lot of fear-mongering going on from both sides, and the entire thing is spiraling out of control.

And Niki wants to put herself in the middle of that conflict.

Tommy sighs, shoving his hands deeper into his pockets to keep them from freezing over in the bitter wind. He tries to keep to the sheltered areas—in the shadows of large buildings, weaving in and out of narrow alleyways, loitering in small alcoves in case he catches sight of any unattended androids—but he finds nothing. Only the occasional small groups of homeless people gathered around the sputtering embers of fires, smoke billowing into their faces. Tommy tries to avoid them whenever possible, but, thankfully, they never pay him much attention besides a cursory glance.

After another hour of roaming the streets, he pauses at an intersection, glaring at the traffic lights that swing in the breeze. They look small from where they hang, twenty feet or so above him, but he knows they're massive. He watches them turn from green to yellow to red, light cutting through the fog in an eerie way that makes them look like the eyes of some great beast.

With every passing second, his mounting discomfort builds. His toes are beginning to stiffen with the cold, the circulation of his thirium slowing down to a lazy crawl. He drums his fingers against the side of his thigh.

It's so dark, the sky an inky void with no stars and no moon to keep it company. Tommy shifts his weight between his feet as he considers his options. Eventually, he decides enough is enough.

He pulls his hat further down to cover the blue flush he can feel building in his ears. He turns on his heel, cutting through the first alleyway he sees to flit between buildings, winding his way back to the direction Niki disappeared to. He walks along the cracked pavement, eyeing the hints of green growing in them that are quickly smothered by the frost.

The alleyway is unimpressive, as most of them are. It's not special in any way shape or form, not as he passes the graffitied dumpster. It continues to be completely unremarkable until he approaches the entrance to some run-down apartment building. There's a single dim,

flickering light that illuminates two people hunched together, and he freezes when recognition dawns on him.

"Ranboo?" he says, disbelieving, before he can even think, past the sheer surprise, to stop himself.

And lo and behold, it *is* Ranboo. The black mask over the slope of his nose and the dip of his cheeks is stained, dirt and grime smeared across the front of it, as well as along his forehead and temples. His hair is dual-toned now, the unremarkable brown now a vibrant black and white split down the middle.

Tommy wants to say it's a stupid thing to do since he's on the run, but it does make him look different, even though it's distinct and memorable. It's long enough, probably, to brush past his chin, but he pulled it back into a bun, the shorter strands hanging loose around his face.

Tommy glances over to the other figure—who's more obscured than Ranboo, tucked between his gangly legs and the wall—and instantly, Ranboo lunges. His left-hand closes around Tommy's jaw, fingers digging into the artificial bone as they both stumble back. His back slams into the brick wall, the back of his skull knocking against it. Stars explode in his vision.

He sucks in a sharp breath through his grit teeth, listens to the overwhelming sound of it whistling through the cracks. Every instinct in him begs him to fight back. His legs half-heartedly kick out at the sheer panic of having his throat grabbed *yet again*. His short fingernails scratch at Ranboo's wrist.

His heart pounds in his ears, drowning out any other sound. He needs to get out, panic overwhelming him in its sickly, sticky wave, but he makes eye contact with Ranboo and he *sees*. He sees neither pleasure nor vindictive satisfaction, only the wild, desperate fear of a prey animal.

Making a split-second decision, he forces himself to go limp until all that holds him up are Ranboo's fingers digging into the bottom of his chin and the wall. He even tries to bare his throat in some kind of soothing submission.

It seems to work. Ranboo drops his hand from Tommy's throat, instead letting his fingers curl in his shirt. They dig into his chest and poke between his individual ribs. He prefers this to the pressure on his neck. Tommy takes greedy, relieved gulps of air.

"Sorry," Ranboo blurts out. His other hand wrangles Tommy's wrists, which he grudgingly allows without a fight. There's something wrong with Ranboo's right arm, stiff and held like its limp. His fingers can't quite curl around his wrists, joints stiff and unwieldy. If Tommy wanted to, he could break out of the hold easily.

He doesn't, though. That would defeat the entire purpose of his surrender.

Instead, he takes in Ranboo and the thin t-shirt that exposes his bare arms to the elements. Only when he focuses on that—on the way his sleeves ride up his shoulders a little—does he catch the thin sheen of frost coating his arm, ending at his elbow. The skin underneath is

peeled back and warping agitatedly. Tommy can see his battered chassis and ice stiffening his joints.

Then what Ranboo said finally dawns on him, and he blinks as he struggles to comprehend. He sounds guilty and sincere, apologetic despite the frantic beat of his pulse that Tommy can feel in each individual finger pressed against him.

"Oh, you know," he says, bewildered. "This isn't the first time I've had my throat grabbed. It's not even the first time *you've* grabbed it." He shifts, attempting a stance where the bricks don't dig into the exposed skin of his lower back, where his many layers have ridden up. "It seems to be a very popular spot."

"Well, it's kind of right there—" he jerks his head towards Tommy's throat, to the skin slowly replacing his bare chassis. "—and, well, I know it isn't the same for androids, but it's a very effective spot for humans."

Tommy nods. "No, no, you're absolutely right. Humans need to breathe." He agrees sagely. "It's very effective."

Michael tugs on the bottom of Ranboo's jacket insistently, and the absurdity of the situation cracks and shatters. It changes his entire demeanor, eyes narrowing and brows furrowing. "Hey, no! What are you doing here? How did you find us?"

Tommy goes to raise his hands defensively but stops at the feel of frozen hands clutching desperately at his wrists. He flexes his fingers instead, testing the inflexibility of Ranboo's stiff fingers. "I know my word probably means nothing to you—" Ranboo snorts. "—but I wasn't looking for you." He rolls his eyes, and Tommy desperately stomps down the feeling of helplessness. "I wasn't! I'm not even a deviant hunter anymore!"

"Then what were you doing?"

Tommy presses his lips together, silent for a few damning seconds too long as he tries to word 'looking for the deviant leader' in a way that doesn't contradict himself. Ranboo snorts. "Real convincing."

"Yeah, okay, I was looking for a deviant, but not in the same way as before!" He lets out a frustrated sigh. "I'm not a deviant hunter anymore!" he says again, although he doesn't think it's any more convincing than the last.

"Yeah, that makes total sense. What, you expect me to believe the android built to hunt down deviants is suddenly a deviant himself?"

Tommy flinches, although it's more muted and less violent than it has been. Hey! That's progress. "Well—sort of. I'm not... *not* a deviant, but that word's a little harsh, you know," he stammers, LED burning beneath his hat. "Let's just say I am no longer accepting orders."

Ranboo narrows his eyes, but his rambling seems to have calmed something in him. Lowered some of his walls. His grip is looser, less pressure and less punishing, but his fingers are still

tangled in the fabric of his sweater. "That seems too good to be true. The famed deviant hunter turned not *not* a deviant."

The look Tommy gives him is downright sardonic. "What can I say? I'm a man of many talents."

Michael makes a noise that might've been a laugh, but when Tommy glances over, his face is stoic, half tucked behind Ranboo. Tommy tries to duck down as much as he can to meet Michael's eyes. Ranboo's hold on his sweater keeps him rooted in place. "Hi Michael," he greets softly.

Now that he's able to get a proper look at him, it's clear the kid is not well. He's in a threadbare hoodie that's clearly Ranboo's, splattered with dried mud and grime. His hair is shaggy and unkempt, growing over his face and the bandage over his right eye. The sight of it, not only seeped through with dried blood but covered in grime, makes him want to wince. It clearly needs to be changed.

"Don't talk to Michael," Ranboo says, slamming him back into the brick wall as if to remind him who he needs to deal with. It's so obviously an act, one that Ranboo is sticking to desperately, but Tommy allows it, as he's allowed everything thus far. Ranboo is not nearly as adept at fighting as he is—their previous encounter only tipping in Ranboo's favor because of the element of surprise and his willingness to throw himself into danger to avoid capture. If Tommy decided to leave, there would be very little either of them could do to stop him.

He doesn't. He stays right where he is, despite the hit to his pride, because everything about this scene is so *wrong*. Ranboo is dirty and desperate with his limbs slowly freezing over. Michael is starved and shaking, a mystery wound hidden behind a bacteria-coated bandage.

He wonders if this is better than staying at home. If Michael is any happier freezing and starving to death out on the streets rather than put up with his father any longer.

Then Tommy thinks of Schlatt, purple in the face with anger. Of the shards of beer bottles lodging in the wall, missing him by centimeters.

Yeah, he thinks, anything's better than that.

"Look," he says, gentling his voice to the tone he used on deviants. Low and soft. "I swear this is just an accident. My friend and I—another deviant," he promises at Ranboo's alarmed look. "—have been scouring the city for someone that knows Tubbo's location. My friend wants to help, and I promised her I'd find him. I wasn't looking for you. If I'm honest, I've barely thought of you since I last saw you." He freezes then and makes a face. "Sorry about that, by the way." He smiles at Michael. "Sorry to scare you guys. I was... well, I definitely wasn't a not *not* deviant then."

Ranboo still looks wary, eyes searching his face for some trace of dishonesty. Tommy makes his expression open and honest, letting every single emotion filter on, even if it pains him to do so. "Here," he says, gently dislodging Ranboo's hand so he can offer his hand out, palm up. "You can take a peak. I promise I'm not—" He swallows instead of finishing a sentence he doesn't know how to.

Instead, he lets the shimmering wave of his skin retracting speak for itself.

Ranboo eventually takes it with his frozen hand and even through the layer of frost, he can still feel his system. It doesn't feel anything like Niki's. Ranboo's is jumpy like a rabbit, system stuttering and starting again like some paranoid, wild thing. Like an arrhythmic heartbeat.

It takes a few seconds for them to get it right, to slide their bare palms together just right, but then a connection snaps into place, fizzy and electric and nothing like the soothing hum of his and Niki's. It's meant to be a one-way connection, and it is, for the most part. Tommy offers up his memories freely, selecting the ones he feels would best illustrate his point.

However, Ranboo is clearly not used to connecting with androids. His control is shoddy, at best, and grainy snippets of memories slip through his loose grasp.

A tense family dinner. Michael is silent and tight-faced, hands gripping his utensils so tight they shake a little. They clack against his plate, filling the dining room with the occasional, arrhythmic sounds of metal against ceramic.

"Would you stop that?" Cyrus snaps, out of the blue, or maybe not, based on the resigned, subtle way Michael flinches. He sets the silverware down with an apologetic dip of his head, but it does little to quell whatever mood Cyrus is winding up to. Tommy burns with the need to do something, anything, to protect his charge like he was programmed to do.

No, it's more than that.

The image dissipates like grains of sand, lost in the whirlwind of erratic memories. There is no careful construction, no organization. Ranboo's system is a mess. He wonders how he remembers anything when they circle and spin and tumble. More than that, Tommy doesn't understand how he can think with all this noise. Tommy finds himself sucked further into his system, like a poor lifeguard that made the mistake of swimming too close to someone drowning.

Michael is cowering under the bed, and Tommy quickly locks the door behind him. "It's okay," he says in Ranboo's low voice. Michael makes a frantic gesture, pointing at the floor where they can hear Cyrus yelling below. "No, it's going to be fine." He glances around jarringly, eyes fixating on an old window facing out to the street. Rain slaps against the slick streets, the droplets catching the dim light of the street lamps.

Tommy moves over, slips his fingers underneath the lip of the window and pulls. It's stuck from years of dust and grime coating the top, creating a filthy seal.

The image is growing fuzzier and more disjointed. The next moment, the window is pried open but so is the door. Cyrus looks pissed. The next moment, he's on top of Tommy, with no indication of how he got there. His hand catches in his hair and slams his head down. There's a knife glinting in his other hand, raising behind his head, arching down...

There's more static, and then Tommy's helping Michael over the sill and out onto a skinny lip of roof. It's wet and slick with the rain that coats them as soon as they step outside. His vision

is wildly distorted, blinking red with warnings of thirium loss and system malfunction.

Before the memory finishes, despite its stops and skips like a scratched DVD, Tommy is unceremoniously booted out of his system. Ranboo yanks away, wide-eyed. Tommy probes his memories to find which ones are out of place, like a kid feeling for a missing tooth. He lost control of himself when Ranboo's system consumed him, so he has no idea which ones Ranboo accessed. They're all right where he left them, though.

"Michael, we're leaving," Ranboo says, voice strained and vulnerable.

"Wait—"

For some inexplicable reason, Ranboo pauses, Michael along with him. Every single interaction, every single moment of contradiction builds a better picture of Ranboo in his head.

(He's a protector, and it's a role that comes as naturally as breathing, but an aggressor, he is not; he postures as a predator because he thinks it will keep Michael safe but he's a herd animal at heart, and like always calls to like.)

When he's sure he has their attention, when he's sure they'll stay, he strips off his chunky sweater. Ranboo pushes Michael behind him when Tommy extends it, but he doesn't immediately flee. "It's not—" he flails it, uselessly. "—chipped or anything."

They're in a stand-off; his conflicting emotions war on his face, so blatant and obvious, but a gust of wind that whips through all three of them seems to seal the deal. He grabs the sweater as quick as a snake, narrowed eyes still searching Tommy's face for a tell of some kind.

All three of them watch as Ranboo violently runs his hands over the sweater, looking for any flaws or defects or tracking devices hidden in inconspicuous locations. He must deem it safe because he kneels down, wrapping Michael up in it. It looks, at least a little bit, absolutely ridiculous. The sweater is big on Tommy, which means that it swallows Michael whole.

Still, he seems pleased, nestling his face in the material, eye shuttering closed. Ranboo meets Tommy's eyes one last time—still so suspicious—but he nods and some of the tension slips out of him.

"Come on," he says, taking Michael's hand and tugging him toward the mouth of the alleyway. Michael follows along willingly, glancing over his shoulder to get one last glimpse of Tommy, still half-sagged against the wall. The kid smiles, small and broken but still real, before disappearing around the corner.

Tommy collapses fully against the wall, icy bricks scratching against the soft skin of his bare arms. It's freezing out here, and without the adrenaline pumping through him, he can feel how sluggish his thirium moves. Still, he allows himself this moment, head tipped back until the cap of his skull connects with the wall. His throat aches and his head aches and his heart aches most of all, as he thinks about that half-frozen deviant and his starving kid.

I got the location! Niki speaks into his mind, his head suddenly filled with a bright enthusiasm he doesn't feel. It feels wrong, to hear such positivity when he feels like one more gust of wind will topple him.

He pulls himself together, though, because that's what he does. That's who he is, even if he's so tired of the relentless determination that constantly fills his veins. Tommy takes a deep breath and allows the cold air to jumpstart his heart. *Oh yeah?*

You're never going to believe what it's called.

"L'Manburg?" Wilbur demands the next day as he's stirring something under Niki's keen eye. He's been learning cooking from Niki as well ever since she announced her formal intentions to leave soon. There are a few recipes of hers that are truly irreplicable, and she decided to teach Wilbur before she goes. It's going about as well as you'd expect. "What kind of name is that?"

Niki shrugs. "The name of the deviant base."

Tommy groans, slumped over the counter. His hands pull at his hair. "I can't *believe* we were right there. Right *there*. I chased the trail to within twenty feet of the deviant base and never fucking figured it out. The boat! Of course it was the boat! Who would look there?"

Finding out that the deviant base, the so-called L'Manburg, was the ancient freighter he saw on the other side of town, when he chased Tubbo's trail through the sewers, was a blow. It served as a good distraction from the lingering worries about Ranboo and Michael, but a blow nonetheless.

"We were *right* there," Tommy whines again. Niki reaches over half-heartedly and pats his head. It doesn't make him feel better.

"You aren't a deviant hunter anymore. It shouldn't matter."

He grumbles his opinion of *that*, pushing his face into the counter so he doesn't have to deal with everything. Surprisingly, that *does* help.

It became a personal point of pride. Yes, Tubbo is no longer his enemy—debatable, some part of him still decides—but that doesn't *matter*. He still got beat by him, even though he doubts that their rivalry was anything more than woefully one-sided. Sure, Tubbo probably knew about him in an abstract sense—he probably knew about all threats to deviants, and the dreaded deviant hunter definitely counted—but it wasn't more personal than that. Not the way Tommy had taken offense to Tubbo's very existence, an affront to everything he stands for. Used to stand for. *Whatever*.

"You're focusing on the wrong thing," Wilbur says after Tommy's grumbling has died down into a bitter, contemplative silence. "It's called *L'Manburg*." He shakes his head. "Honestly,

it's a good thing that isn't public knowledge. I don't know how they expect to be taken seriously..."

Niki shrugs, apathetic to this conversation other than her tangible excitement about the end of their fruitless search.

Tommy raises his head. "Hey! I kinda like it."

Wilbur makes a face. "Of course you do. You have the worst taste in everything. Plus, you're literally like one year old. You're a baby. An infant. What do you know about anything?"

"Fuck off," Tommy mumbles, sinking back into the counter. "Where did you even find deviants?" She refused to talk about whatever she'd seen on the way back, lips pressed together as if to avoid the temptation.

Niki sobers. "The trash heap. I figured—well, since people are tossing their androids, there's bound to be a few deviants in there. Just going there was a traumatic experience itself. I can't imagine... being one of the androids there." There's a distant look on her face, a frown twisting her mouth.

Wilbur nods. He sways, knocking their shoulders together. "That must've been shitty."

"It was," Niki says, and they leave it at that. Tommy frowns, wanting to sink his claws into the conversation and drag it back from wherever past conversation topics go to die. He wants to keep talking about it, an itchy feeling creeping up the back of his neck. Maybe it's another horrible thing to heap onto, to bury the memory of Michael's face marred with dirt.

Something must show on his face because Niki shakes her head. He sighs, but resigns himself to ask another time, later. The mood is already stabilizing, Wilbur's grin coming easier with them tucked away in the kitchen. Tommy lets himself settle into the moment, in the gentle, warm affection that passes so easily between the three of them. He bides his time, staying present but silent as Niki and Wilbur bicker good-naturedly.

Eventually, they move to the couch to watch some peaceful documentary while Wilbur dozes off and on. As he falls into a particularly deep bout—drooling on Tommy's shoulder, unfortunately—Tommy glances over to Niki. She stares resolutely at the screen, despite the slight flicker of her eyes toward him.

"Niki," he says, quietly, when she keeps ignoring him. He holds out his hand, skin melting away.

"It's not pretty," she says in a tone he's begun to think of as her 'no-nonsense voice'.

"I know that. But I have to see it." He doesn't elaborate why, and Niki doesn't ask. She just presses her lips together and stares at her hands in her lap, already bare in an instinctive response to Tommy's proximity.

"Promise me something." He makes a questioning noise. "Don't use what you see as fuel." He makes another, more confused noise, and she finally looks up to fix him with a stern look.

"Don't play dumb. You take every opportunity to beat yourself up when it comes to deviants. And I know, I *know*, but I just... it's not good, what I saw there. It was enough to make me sick, and you... you take everything so personally, Tommy. Even when it has nothing to do with you."

Tommy clenches his jaw at the raw, exposed feeling of the top layer of his skin being peeled back. "I won't," he says, although he thinks neither of them know whether or not it's a lie. She nods after a moment of silence and slots their hands together.

It's not pretty.

On the edge of the city, where the houses are dilapidated and the streets neglected, there sits the city dump. A long time ago, it must've been a true sight; a massive dirt pit in the ground, about a mile wide. Now, it's less of one. Trash is strewn across every single inch of the ground, sloping down the sides of it. It forms grooves and valleys and tall mountainous peaks—entire biomes and ecosystems forming between its quadrants.

He stands at the edge of it, where the mud mixes with garbage. From there, he can see everything; the functioning androids that wander aimlessly, their flickering LEDs the only thing denoting their presence. He wastes little time watching them.

It's a whole other world at the base of the summit. The mountains of trash tower above him. The androids show no sign of noticing him. They shamble and stagger without motive or cause, eyes hazy and unfocused. They're missing arms and legs and entire sections of their chassis, with severed wires hanging limp from torn sockets. Thirium stains their skin, their hair is missing in patchy clumps, eyes gouged from their sockets.

They're straight out of a horror movie, and yet, they're somehow better than the alternative. Than the half-functional ones scattered along the ground, tucked away with the other garbage. Those ones are missing entire thirds of their bodies—their lower halves, their right sides.

He weaves through the wandering masses, eyes scanning the ground for any semblance of mental presence. He pauses when he comes across an android, jagged wounds lining the side of their face. They turn, and there is no face, just—

Tommy reels back, tucking his hand against his abdomen to keep it as far from Niki as he can. Niki gives him a sad look and pats his clothed shoulder through his whole body flinch.

Niki decides to stay a little longer, just to give everyone—Wilbur and *definitely not Tommy*—time to adjust to the idea of her absence. Although they're well into March by now and quickly approaching spring, the weather has not improved. It still snows frequently, burying the ground in layers of frost and ice that few plants have hope of surviving.

Their lessons take on a sudden increase, both in frequency and importance. Niki seems determined to make sure they'll be okay when she's gone, which apparently means securing an edible food source for Wilbur and forcing a new mission onto Tommy. She pushes him harder, but Tommy's skill has slowly increased over the past weeks of lessons. He keeps up, if only barely, but he appreciates it all the same. It gives him little time to think about how, with each second, her departure looms closer.

Wilbur leaves work as soon as possible, and the three of them spend long evenings together on the couch. None of them mention how their time together dwindles, but it hangs over them all the same.

When Niki finally decides to leave, it's spring.

"It's the season of fresh starts, you know" she explains unnecessarily as she packs a bag. She's nervous, overcompensating, he thinks, and justifying her actions even though neither Wilbur nor himself have asked that of her. She gestures wildly and aimlessly over her shoulder. "This will be good. A new adventure."

She doesn't have much in the way of belongings—just the clothes Wilbur bought and a few trinkets given to her in her time here. It doesn't take long to pack, even with her subtle efforts to prolong it. Tommy wonders why she doesn't just stay here if she's so suddenly unsure. But every time she seems to waver, lip caught between her teeth, she steels herself with a nod.

"I'm leaving copies of all my recipes," she says as they helplessly follow her into the kitchen. She pats the thick stack of notecards pressed into the corner of the counter. "You will carry them to your grave, lest my spirit haunts yours until you meet an early and just death."

"We will carry them to our graves—" Wilbur and Tommy recite dutifully as they place their hands over hers on the stack of recipes. "—lest your spirit haunts ours until we meet an early and just death."

Niki pauses. She reeks of sorrow, of bittersweet affection, and of steely determination. For a moment, she simply stares at them, at their hands. They've given up on the apathetic pile, their fingers instead winding together in a knotted, tangled mess until they can no longer differentiate themselves. They cease to be three in this messy pile over the heart of her recipes.

"You boys take care of yourselves," she says softly. She stands on her tiptoes to press a kiss onto their cheeks, and then soothes her hand over the spot. Her fingers dig in a little, nails catching on their skin as if she's trying to imprint a small part of herself. A bruised handprint that would never fade away. "Yourselves and each other."

Wilbur smiles, breaking off just to wind an arm around her waist and pull her into his side. "Don't worry about us. We'll be fine. You just focus on kicking ass, okay?"

They share more sentimental goodbyes, hands clinging to anything they can reach. Eventually, Niki cuts it short with a fond shake of her head, and the two of them set out. Just Niki and Tommy, for one last time.

It's cold and dark and cloudy, and it takes hours to wander through the city. They trace familiar paths through the dark, ducking into alleyways to avoid cars streaming along the roads and their beaming headlights. They hold hands the entire time, risking it a little with the way their bare pinkies intertwine. Communication passes freely between them, emotions and half-formed thoughts and anything, everything else.

They spot their destination in the distance when they get close enough; Niki's excitement builds, thrumming in his own veins, an awful pair to his own sickening anxiety, to the frantic rabbiting of his heart.

It's even larger up close. The metal is completely rusted over with years of disuse, barnacles lining its hull. It looks one good breeze away from collapsing into the sea, but they both watch it sway and bob with the rhythmic waves. There's nothing to give away whatever life is inside, and for a moment, Tommy is certain they're wrong.

He doesn't know how long they stand there. Everything feels removed from time. The crash of the waves against the rotted docks, the snow crunching underfoot, the ink-black water reaching out as far as they can see.

Niki's fingers brush the inside of his wrist; automatically, he turns his hand, palm up, towards her. He looks at her, and there's so much he wants to tell her. There're so many ways that he wants to express his gratitude, his condolences, his apologies. Emotions and thoughts and feelings are welling up faster than he can even put words to them; they could live a thousand lives, and he still doesn't think it would be enough.

He says nothing because, in the end, he doesn't need to. Anything that needs to be said has already been said, whether verbally or not.

Niki smiles, eyes shining. She reaches up, tucking an errant curl behind his ear. Her fingers tickle his ear, and his skin buzzes with the phantom feeling, even as she steps away. Even as she disappears.

It's odd, being alone again.

Wilbur works increasingly long hours, and even though he comes home with poorly disguised guilt and a warm, apologetic smile, the silence is too reminiscent of their early days for Tommy's comfort. He spends every second of his time away from the couch, instead distracting himself with the few things he can: the slow growth of his indoor garden, cleaning up the sketchy lines of their backyard blueprints, kneading dough into recognizable shapes.

It's a lonely and sad existence without Niki and with Wilbur's increasing absences. He itches to do something, not (only) because of the deep, lingering desire to be useful but because he's *bored*. Because the handful of hobbies he picked up aren't enough to fill the long hours of the day. He longs to be back at work, letting the easy comradery and the playful banter wash over him. He wants to bury himself in case after case.

It's fine, though. It seems stupid to be ungrateful for his boredom, when his time before the boredom was so...

There isn't a word to describe it. Not one he knows, anyway.

So he shoves down the growing unhappiness and always greets Wilbur with a smile, no matter how paper-thin. He's already taken up so much of his life, and even though he knows, deep in the rational part of his brain, that Wilbur welcomes his intrusion. He's grateful for it, even, for the way Tommy has seeped into the shattered remains of his life and given it new breath.

But knowing something rationally is not the same as knowing it instinctively. Tommy can't help but feel like a burden.

Plus, it's strange to interact with him alone, without the filter of Niki. She's been a good go-between—a source of strength and affection for them both. She eased their stilted communication without either of their notice and without her, it's odd. They've fallen back into old habits of awkward silences and strained small talk.

He figures it's just one of those things—something that will ease with time. They just need to reacquaint themselves with being around each other alone. They've fallen back into preconceived niches. Wilbur softens every single joking insult, as if he doesn't think Tommy can *handle* it. As if he thinks Tommy is as delicate as fractured glass.

Wilbur's well-meaning pity grates on him, wearing down his patience until Tommy can't stand being around him. He snaps, and the resulting argument is truly of epic proportions. It's one of the ugly ones, where each comment is misunderstood and misconstrued. They don't sink to petty insults, but it's a near thing. Tommy's frustration leaves him short-fused and thin-filtered, and more often than not, he bites back instinctive insults.

It leaves the house in a perpetual cloud of tension. Tommy fumes for days to come, and Wilbur clings to bitter silence. Instead, he lets the frustration and hurt etched in his face speak for itself; it works, frustratingly enough. Tommy welcomes his absences. And yet, he can't help but orbit him when he's home, soaking in his presence despite the stony silence.

On the fourth day of tension, Wilbur comes home drunk. Tommy locks himself in Fundy's room as soon as he smells alcohol on him—not beer, thankfully, but the smell is repulsive and pungent and painfully alcoholic. His hands shake the entire night, his breath stuttering and mind racing as he uselessly tries to convince himself that Wilbur is *not* Schlatt. He points out the differences between them and clings to Wilbur's penchant for moping rather than sinking into hot anger.

It doesn't help much. And in the end, it's a horrible, terrible night for both of them.

The only good thing to come of it is the resolution of their argument. The next morning, Wilbur is groggy and hungover and profusely apologetic, past the point of annoying. Tommy snaps at him after the 56th apology—yes, 56, Tommy counted—and they finally stumble into the conversation that had been building for a while.

It's a test of communication—a display of everything taught to Wilbur in therapy. Navigating the conversation is rough; Wilbur, especially, seems pained by the vulnerability, but he soldiers through it with a grim twist to his mouth. He talks about subjects they've touched on before—his obvious fear of abandonment—as well as new ones. He describes his impotence and helplessness in the face of Tommy's pain and the lingering ache of Tommy's betrayal.

He understands, Wilbur makes a point to say, several times. He understands the why of it all—the underlying reasons behind Tommy's choice. But even though he forgave Tommy a long time ago, that kind of pain doesn't dissipate into thin air.

Tommy takes it all in silently, the hitches and stutters of his breath the only sound he allows. Somehow, somewhere, they ended up sitting on the floor with their backs pressed against the couch, knees overlapping in some semblance of wordless comfort. Hearing all the ways that Wilbur hurts—all the ways that *Tommy* exacerbates and eases that pain in equal measure—makes his entire body ache.

In turn, he tries his best to express his side of things with frantic hand movements and a furrowed brow. He tries to explain the sickly slide of pity against his skin, all the ways Wilbur makes him feel *fragile* sometimes, how nothing about his time After Schlatt has been *easy* but how he likes the normalcy they've wandered into. He dips into his time with Schlatt only a little—bare essentials, really—and then, when he finds no other words, they stumble into the heart of the issue, the elephant always in the room.

They delve into Tommy's betrayal.

It's equal parts cathartic and mind-numbingly painful. Wilbur already knows about Dream, but he's hard to conceptualize without experiencing firsthand, especially when Tommy learns he's not Dream but D.R.E.A.M—an AI program created to keep him in line. Despite the new dizziness in his brain, he tries to walk Wilbur through his thought process. To give some kind of explanation for his actions.

It doesn't—can't—make up for the pain he's caused, but Wilbur is owed an explanation, all the same.

"I'm sorry," Tommy says, for what he thinks might be the first time. They've always avoided talking about it in an attempt to uphold the comradery between them; ultimately, it was a thorn constantly digging into their sides. A poison status effect, slowly draining the affection and positivity of their relationship the more it went unacknowledged.

In the end, it doesn't matter that Tommy had his reasons. He made his choice, and he hurt Wilbur. Sometimes, he wonders what kind of life they would've had if Tommy had made a different one. If he told Wilbur about the conversation with Dream, if he broke the barrier earlier... Sometimes, in the space right before he falls asleep, it consumes his mind.

Playing the 'what if' game is a waste of time, he finds. They're here now.

"I promised I'd always be there for you and then..." he swallows and makes himself look at Wilbur. "I wasn't."

Wilbur's chest expands slowly, each breath measured. He's trying to avoid looking at Tommy, to avoid acknowledging or allowing the tears that have welled up in his eyes. He doesn't try to justify Tommy's actions or wave off his apology, and for that, Tommy is grateful. He *does*, however, reach out to take Tommy's hand, squeezing the wrong side of painful.

"I told you I already forgave you. It's not... that." He falls silent for a long time, and they both listen to the heavy, wet hitch that happens whenever he's holding back the wild flood of emotions. "I'm not trying to coddle you," he says again—the most important takeaway for him. It's more important to address Tommy's frustration than even his own, apparently. "I just..."

Tommy shuts his eyes. "...don't trust me not to leave again." Wilbur presses his lips together; it's an answer as much as it isn't. "That's it, isn't it? You forgave me a long time ago, sure, but I shattered your trust. And even though I make promises and assurances, and even though rationally you know that I care, you can't help but feel like I'll leave again."

Wilbur traces his thumb along the ridges of his knuckles following the pathway of hairline scratches that always seem to cover his hands. "That," he agrees. He smiles. It's a broken expression. "I'm a mess at work, you know. I keep thinking I'll come home one day, and you'll just be... *poof*. Gone." He makes a gesture to emphasize his point. "It was easier with Niki here since I knew you'd stay."

I knew you'd stay. It echoes in his mind on a loop, ringing in his ears long after the silence falls once again. The thought is unfinished, but Tommy can feel the self-deprecation dripping from it.

He bites his lip against the immense desire to cry.

"But thank you. For apologizing. And I'm sorry, again, for the—the drinking." He digs the heel of his palms into his eyes, twisting away the tears. He laughs, breathy and bitter. "We just can't stop hurting each other, it seems."

Tommy takes him in—the scruff he hasn't had time to shave off yet, the angular line of his jaw, the curls flattened against his forehead.

Sometimes, he thinks he might love Wilbur more than life itself. That his affection for him is so strong that he won't be able to contain it. That it will start leaking out of him in golden beams of light.

He looks away, focusing instead on their fuzzy, blurry reflections in the dark TV and the one spot of blinking light on his forehead.

"I think..." he says slowly. "Maybe that's just how it is." These are scraped together, raw thoughts, not anything concise or even coherent. "When you love someone. You see the best and the worst and everything else, and you know them, as they know you. And it's frustrating, and messy, and at some point, you kind of start... bleeding together, until it becomes impossible to extract yourself completely. And you keep hurting each other. But it's kind of okay, because you try to be better."

When Tommy risks a glance up, Wilbur wears an expression oozing with fondness; Tommy's heart threatens to explode. "The mortifying ordeal of being known, huh?" he says. He smiles, small but real. "Yeah, alright." Wilbur holds out his pinkie, something that has become commonplace ever since Tommy linked theirs together under the door. "I'll try to be better. I'll fail, again and again, but I'll never stop trying," he promises.

It's not a promise to never drink again. Wilbur can't possibly promise that, not with a future so murky and uncertain. Not when his self-control is an old pair of pants—frayed and threadbare and constantly patched back together. It's not a guarantee that they won't be in this same situation again, that Tommy won't have to barricade himself in his room and convince himself of his safety.

He doesn't need it to be, though. This? This realistic assurance of certain failure as well as perpetual progress? Tommy prefers this much more. This, at least, he knows Wilbur will be able to keep.

Tommy bobs their linked pinkies, decisively.

Things get better after that. They slowly learn to stop dancing around each other, to have constructive conversations instead of pushing down their emotions until they explode like a splintered dam. Wilbur tries to treat Tommy without the kid gloves he's adopted since Schlatt and slowly leans back on their fractured trust. It will take time for them to repair it—held together with nothing but duct tape and sheer force of will as it is now can't support more weight—but that's okay.

Tommy's beginning to believe they'll have that time.

Wilbur buys him a truly ancient burner phone that Tommy connects his system to. He's able to use the number to talk or text Wilbur whenever he has reception, something that is becoming increasingly important with how wacky Wilbur's hours have become.

This achieves two important goals. First, it serves as a crutch for their trust. With Tommy now always within communicating distance, Wilbur learns to relax a little. Tommy texts frequent updates, usually about whatever escapades he has planned or sometimes just a simple assurance. He sends pictures of dead basil leaves with a frowny face, of the missing puzzle piece they'd been searching for hours for—that Tommy promised to wait before completing—of the perpetual, never-ending snow.

Second, it alleviates Tommy's boredom, at least a little. With direct communication access, it eases the sickly feeling of being left behind and forgotten. It still doesn't fix the other myriad of problems: the growing unease of an entire country, mainly, as well as Tommy's increasing frustration with his 'suspension', for lack of a better word.

"You need a new hobby," Wilbur says one day when he comes home from work to find Tommy meticulously picking dirt out of the living room carpet, cheek pressed to the ground. "Really, Toms, this is just getting sad."

"Hey!" Tommy jerks up, blinking at the sudden adjustment from seeking out the tiny participants of dirt, dust, and Wilbur's dead skin cells—humans are fucking *nasty*—to

looking at Wilbur. His eyes are still so focused that he can't help but see *everything*. "You really need a different skin care regimen. Your pores are *atrocious*," he says, distracted. "And I have plenty of hobbies!"

"Like what? Staring longingly at the backyard, waiting for the ground to defrost? Or maybe wiping the daily dust off the record player. Completing the puzzle *we started together*." Wilbur blinks, brow furrowing. "Wait, what the fuck did you just say?"

"If you could see the things I can, Wil." He shakes his head and shudders, the movement exaggerated. Wilbur wipes the back of his hand across his cheek with a frown. "And dust *does* accumulate daily. It's not my fault that humans have shit eyes, let alone *you*, Mr. I-need-this-dumb-glass-to-give-me-the-vision-of-normal-people—"

"—that's so long. Comedy relies on sharp comments. Come on, I thought you were better than that."

"And it's not my fault that I'm wasting away in here." He sniffs, shoving himself up and wiping all the microscopic gunk onto Wilbur's bare arm as he passes by. "The dust doesn't appreciate my comedy."

"That's the real tragedy here," he agrees. "I'll get right on that letter to Big Dust, letting them know their employees don't see a true comedic genius even when he's wiping them away." Wilbur kicks his shoes off on the mat by the front door, then makes his way into the kitchen with Tommy trailing behind him. "Like I said, *new hobby*."

"I don't need a new hobby, Wil," Tommy says, petulantly. "I need it to stop being winter."

"Yeah, I'll get right on that. Right after my letter to Big Dust." The kitchen is warm and familiar. As much as he loves the living room and all that it entails, the kitchen has slowly become the heart of their home. It's where Niki always congregated, where they always used to host the Sunday dinners.

"Ha ha," Tommy says without a trace of humor. "Really, you're hilarious." Wilbur gives him a sardonic grin before ducking his head into the fridge.

Tommy takes up his custom place, forearms pressed against the counter. He taps his fingers against it absent-mindedly, eyes lazily tracking Wilbur as he moves around the kitchen. He wonders if he should suggest bringing back the Sunday dinners again, or if it would be too complicated with his presence. Techno clearly knows and is fine with it, but Phil is a wild card. He's more obligated to report him than Techno, but would he do that to Wilbur?

"You need to find something new you enjoy," Wilbur says after a while. The stove flame flickers, and Tommy watches them dance. "You're like Niki. You don't like being trapped, or lounging around for long periods." He turns, the light catching on his microscopically large-pored face. "You could do something similar to her. You seemed pretty good at saving deviants before." He shrugs. "It would be a good ironic twist. Deviant hunter turned deviant rescuer."

Tommy makes a face at that, and Wilbur laughs.

"Just something to think about," he says, turning back to the pot simmering on the stove.

Despite how late it is, Wilbur still isn't home. As far as Tommy knows, he's been working on a case with Quackity and Charlie, a double homicide that has Tommy's fingers itching to work. He's been hoping to weasel the details out of him, but Wilbur always comes home so exhausted, and by the time he can finally go to bed—dark circles sagging beneath his eyes, worse than they have been lately—he never has the heart to.

Tommy loiters in the living room, hugging one of the pillows to his chest as he watches TV. He's watching some Spanish soap opera, blinking wide as one of the characters—a sleazy man ill-cast in the role as the love interest—is bludgeoned over the head with Abuela's urn in a shocking (and disrespectful) move. It's because of that—and the surprised gasp unwillingly torn from him—that he initially mistakes the noise outside for the thump of his dead body on the study floor. Instead, he keeps watching, blissfully ignorant as he squints at the terrible special effects, at the too-light blood sticking to his gelled hair.

The second thump is mismatched with the TV audio; it can't be as easily dismissed when Tommy's favorite character—who yes, did just bludgeon that man to death—is quietly sobbing over the body. Tommy pauses the show, cocking his head to listen.

He hears the still night, the absence of the crickets that were commonplace back in the dying days of fall. Then a third thump, from somewhere outside the front door. He gets up on light feet and peers through the peephole. There's a figure standing in their driveway, back hunched as they rummage through their garbage can.

Unless the raccoons have gotten much, much bigger—or gained the communication skills necessary to hire outside help—he's guessing this is probably something different.

Tommy watches for a while, wrestling with the possibilities. Exposing himself is potentially dangerous, especially with his LED on prominent display, but he finds himself curious. He watches for a while, eyeing the figure rip open garbage bags in search of something. For a moment, the idea crosses his mind that this could be Schlatt, desperate for some proof of Tommy's existence, searching for one last chance to finish what they started. It's a stupid idea, an implausible one, and yet his back straightens, his spine growing rigid. He sways in place, undecided, until he spots a second, smaller figure, hidden by the mixing of the taller figure's shadow and the trash can.

Before he can contemplate it, before he can process the thought for more than a second, he pulls his hat off the coat rack, shoves it over his head, and opens the door. Golden light spills out but only the corner of it catches dual-toned hair. As he suspected.

Tommy relaxes all of his muscles and presents a wry but unthreatening expression. "We meet again," he says.

From the noise of the door and the light spilling out alone, Ranboo looks ready to do... something. Bolt or attack. One hand is gripping Michael's arm with what looks like too much force, the skin paling from his clenched fingers. His feet still, though, and root him in place.

It's only been a few weeks since he last saw them, but they look so much worse. Somewhere along the way, Ranboo lost his hair tie; his hair hangs, dirty and limp, framing his face like some wild beast. He's found a hoodie along the way, but the sleeve is torn, hanging on by mere threads. It exposes his bare arm, of which the frost has crept up to mid-bicep. The entire arm hangs, limp and useless by his side.

Michael's bandage doesn't look any cleaner. Honestly, it looks like it might be festering, his face pale and sweaty despite the way his breath clouds in the air. He's still wearing Tommy's sweater, big and chunky and swallowing him whole, but it's covered in muck and boasting a thin layer of grime that seems to seep into the very threads. Despite it, he's shivering audibly, his teeth clacking together. Saved from one hell only to live in another.

Tommy tries to breathe through his nose, to calm the instinctive, knee-jerk reaction to do... well, something. He isn't entirely sure past the blinding, deafening roar of his own heartbeat in his ears or the itching cramping his hands. "Funny meeting you here," he tries again when nobody moves, but the humor of it—the comedic tone he was so desperately reaching for—leaked out before he even formed the words.

Ranboo narrows his eyes, and again, Tommy is struck by how much he looks like a wild animal. It's an unfair comparison—a mean one, too, to dehumanize him even further—but it fits so well. His curved shoulders, his back arched in preparation for whatever movements he needs. They say the eyes are the window to the soul, but Tommy has such trouble deciphering what expression lays on his face when they're all he has to go off of. He can only imagine what shape his mouth takes. Are his lips pulled back into a silent snarl, baring his teeth to ward away predators? Or are they pressed together in a thin, worried line?

His expression tightens, eyes glinting, and Tommy *knows* what's coming next. "Are you—"

"If you're about to ask me if I'm stalking you two..." he tosses a pointed look over his shoulder, back into the warm living room. "This is literally my house."

Ranboo's jaw clicks. "You and your detective's."

Tommy tilts his head. "He's not here, if that's what you're worried about. He's working late tonight, and he always texts me before he leaves."

He does relax then, if only incrementally.

Tommy considers them and lets out a slow breath. It's a high-stakes game that he doesn't know the rules to. "You guys look cold." He steps out onto the porch, moving out of the way so the light and warmth of the house can seep out—a silent invitation.

Ranboo takes a half step back, and Tommy's gut clenches. "If you think we're going in there..."

Tommy eyes Ranboo and then Michael. Even through the chunky layers of Ranboo's jacket and Tommy's sweater, he can tell how much weight Michael has lost. He doesn't have to see his hidden body—and the ribs that will inevitably show through his too-big shirt—to know. It's in his gaunt face, in the sunken circles underneath his eyes. He looks pale and sickly, hair greasy and lackluster. There is so much he needs: a bath, warm clean clothes, a good night's sleep, a hearty meal, and a fucking hug, to start.

There's so much going on with these two, Tommy doesn't even know where to start. He doesn't know how to offer help in a way they'll accept. All he can do is stand in the doorway, let the light illuminate them, and drink them in with his eyes. Commit their faces to his memory when they inevitably die, and Tommy is the only one left to remember them.

He feels so fucking helpless. His nails dig into his bare skin. All he can do is try to keep the despair from showing on his face. He considers his options, his mobility with the rigid, unspoken confines of this interaction. He wonders if they'll stay if he retreats back inside, or if his presence is the only thing freezing them in place.

"Okay. Setting foot inside is a no," he says out loud, glancing over his shoulder to the fridge. "Will you accept food if I offer it?"

Ranboo looks surprised; Michael looks hesitantly hopeful, eyes watching Tommy with a desperate kind of hunger. His stomach growls at the mere mention of food, the barest hint of it. He glances up, expressing a wordless, meaningful look at Ranboo. And while Ranboo says nothing—he doesn't even return the look—there's something in his body language that makes Tommy think they'll stay. Despite the risk, despite Tommy's less-than-shiny reputation, they'll stay.

Maybe it's because of whatever Ranboo saw in his memories. Maybe it's just desperation, pure and simple. The animal instinct to survive.

Tommy ducks back inside, immediately heading towards the bread box. He unwraps a loaf he made a few days ago, then pauses. He leaves the loaf, a plan quickly stitching together in his mind. Instead, he reaches into the fridge, pulling out a Tupperware container of thick stew he made yesterday. He prepares a bowl in the microwave, sticks their second-best spoon into it, and heads back outside. It steams in the air, and Michael watches it with eyes the size of dinner plates.

"Eat slowly. Your body probably isn't used to a lot of food," Tommy instructs as he holds the bowl out. It's worthless if he throws it all up. Michael nods. "And be careful. The bowl is hot." Michael accepts it with reverence, eagerly pressing his hands to the warm ceramic. He instantly starts to wolf it down.

"Hey, slow," Ranboo reminds him and Michael begrudgingly listens. For a while, the only noise is the biting wind and the appreciative, slow slurps. Both Ranboo and Tommy watch as he eats.

Wilbur expresses his compliments frequently, but he's never looked at anything Tommy's cooked with pure, blatant hunger before. Never savored every mouthful or used dirty fingers to scoop up the droplets that remain in the bowl. Maybe it should be flattering.

It's not. It's just sad. This poor kid, shivering and shaking—his teeth actually chattering—devouring this meal like it's his last. It's probably the first proper meal he's eaten in days, weeks, maybe.

He looks up once he's done, looking hopeful. Tommy would love nothing more than to fill his belly with every scrap of food in the house, but he's malnourished. Even that large bowl of soup is pushing it. He tries to smile to soften the rejection. "I'm worried you'll throw up if I give you any more," he says. Michael looks disappointed but reluctantly understanding. He smiles as he offers the bowl back. Tommy thanks him quietly. "I think I might have a compromise though."

He ducks back inside, depositing the bowl into the sink. He rewraps the half loaf of bread and grabs one of the plastic grocery bags Wilbur always saves. He tucks that inside as well as a few other things—granola bars and other snacks that will keep. When he comes back out, Michael is leaning against Ranboo's legs, looking sleepy. He hands it to Ranboo. "Here."

Ranboo takes a peek inside, brow furrowing. He doesn't look so blatantly suspicious anymore, just confused and wary. He ties the bag to one of his belt loops, still squinting. He doesn't voice his confusion although he waits for a moment, just staring.

Tommy tries to smile. "You guys are always welcome here, if you need a place to stay. Or if you need more food."

That seems to be the nail in the coffin of Ranboo's hesitation. He glares at Tommy, tucking Michael behind him as they slowly back away.

Letting them go is like a physical ache in his gut. He watches them, helplessly, from the front porch. He watches their careful steps down the sidewalks, the way they favor the long shadows of houses and trees and lampposts with sputtered-out lights. Ranboo keeps casting paranoid glances over his shoulder, like he's half convinced Tommy is going to stalk after them in his pajamas.

He wriggles his feet, already going stiff from the cold, and tries to focus on anything other than the growing pit of dread.

Oh fuck. Out loud, he sighs, eyes closing as the horrid realization sets in. Because of the heavy feeling that's settled in his gut like a physical pull to do *something*.

It seems Wilbur was right after all. And he's going to be an unbearable, smug bastard when he figures that out.

The next night, when Wilbur apologetically texts him about being late once again, Tommy pulls on his hat and sits down on the porch to wait. There's no guarantee that Ranboo will be back—in fact, Tommy would wager that Ranboo won't be back, not until there's no other

choice. Not until his desperation outweighs the shreds of rationality and paranoia he clings to.

And still, Tommy sits, shivering despite the damp warmth that seems so unusual in the night. The frost is beginning to bleed, damp droplets of dew beading on the grass that's used to the smothering snow. It's been an unseasonably cold spring.

The first droplets of rain, when they come, are a welcome surprise. They splatter on his forehead, warm and bringing with them the fresh, earthy breeze of a proper spring. Tommy tilts his head, pulling his hat back just enough to allow the water to reach his hairline and soothe his swirling LED.

Chapter End Notes

First of all, happy spring! Although I love snow, I fucking love spring--and the sun--way more. Best season without a doubt.

Honestly, I'm really curious what you guys think of my writing style. When I edit, I don't really cut out stuff (which you are absolutely supposed to do) so I feel like my writing might be a little slow/clogged down? Do y'all ever get kind of tired or impatient when reading? (It's absolutely okay if you do, I just have no concept of how my writing is received)

fragmented reels

Chapter Summary

Spring passes quickly when measuring it by the time between sketchy nighttime meetings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Fragmented Reels

Tommy doesn't stop trying, after that. It lights the fires of his determination, so to speak, and even if Ranboo and Michael never darken his doorstep again, he will try, goddammit.

He leaves bags full of cans and other non-perishables—protein bars and cups of diced fruit that will stay long enough, through damp nights. He sits on the porch every night—regardless of rain or the cold or the gross, humid heat—with his hat pulled low over his head. And when he starts to suspect that maybe his presence, so blatant and obvious—a sore thumb on Wilbur's concrete porch—is scaring them away, he sequesters himself inside and stares out the peephole for hours.

Unsurprisingly, they don't show. Sometimes the bag will be gone. Sometimes, it will still be there. Tommy doesn't know if that means they got it, if some raccoon found the motherload, or some other, unknown third option.

Instead, he always ends up crashing on the couch, jerking his head up and blinking the sleep out of his eyes whenever Wilbur finally gets home, Ranboo's name nearly on his lips. He considers telling Wilbur about this—especially when he catches the frequent half-affectionate, half-concerned looks—but the words almost always dry up in his mouth. What is there even to tell, at this point?

After a few weeks of this, Tommy becomes lax in his so-called stakeouts.

He lounges on the couch, music turned on, but low, so that he can still hear the ambient noise of the night. The stirrings of crickets, the mournful tune of a lone bird, the occasional car rumbling past on the rickety, uneven streets. It's nice, he finds, as those noises and the low bass of his music mix and meld together to create something else entirely.

There's joy to be found in those so-called silences, he finds, even if Tommy can no longer keep his thoughts on his ill-thought-out rescue. Instead, they keep straying towards the lumpy cushions and their sweet whisper of his name. He thinks about what he'll do when they come again and drools into the lumpy pillows.

The first time Tommy sees them again, weeks have passed since their prior meeting. *Weeks*. Days upon days of restless half-slumber, of falling in and out of sleep only to jerk awake at the slightest noise or provocation. It's bad enough that Wilbur has forgone hiding his concerned stares, sitting him down every now and then in an awkward attempt at comfort—"It's okay not to be okay," Wilbur says every time, as if Tommy would *forget*. As if his jumpiness is due to something else rather than the on-edge adrenaline of waiting for a semi-violent deviant and the child he kidnapped to appear once more.

The encounter, in all his dreams, goes like this:

Ranboo and Michael roll up, presumably, from whatever direction they come and go from, meek and careful like little mice. They nose around the garbage as they had been doing, when they last met, but upon finding it, they instead inspect the generously provided bag of goodies.

At that point, Tommy would crack the door, call out quietly in a show of general goodwill and peace, and they would go from there. Obviously, in the ideal situation, Ranboo would trust him despite his best judgment, and things would progress. If not, that's alright, too. Tommy is capable of patience, despite how it itches along his skin. What else is he supposed to do, in this awkward era of android rebellion, paranoia, and increasingly harsh deviant destruction?

When it actually happens, though, nothing goes according to the wild fantasies he dreams up in the moments before he sags into the cushions.

After days of waiting on a knife's edge, of tiring himself out by doing nothing but keeping himself half-conscious for a statistically unlikely sign, he's a little, a tad, just a tiny bit excited.

The encounter, in reality, goes down like this:

Tommy, half-asleep and still groggy from any myriad of things, hears a noise outside. It's not a usual noise—the scrape of the garbage can against the driveway as the raccoons dig into it, the drag of old tires across even older pavement—and so, in his half-delirium, he shoves a hat over his head and whips open the door so hard, the handle nearly cracks into the wall.

He isn't expecting anything, not really, so when he spots Ranboo, frozen in some kind of half-hunch, fingers tangled in the plastic straps of the bag, he isn't at all responsible for the things he does afterwards, in the blurry haze of sudden adrenaline.

As their eyes meet, as Ranboo straightens up to his full—reluctantly impressive—height, bag swinging loosely on his thin wrist, Tommy sucks in a sharp breath and levels an accusing finger at him. The noise that punches out of him is strangled and wet, caught halfway between pure animalistic surprise and a vindicated exclamation of "*Ah-ha!*"

And, as anyone with a brain not currently sluggish and fuzzy around the edges with interrupted sleep could've predicted, Ranboo catches Michael's hand and takes off down the street.

And thus ends their fourth meeting.

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The next time, Tommy is a little more alert, a little more aware of the circumstances, and chooses to wiggle his fingertips underneath the window sill and pry it open rather than attempt the door.

It's old, so the glide isn't so much a glide as a jerky, dying wail. Any chance of subtlety is thrown out of the proverbial window—not the actual one he's leering out of—and so by the time he has it open wide enough, Ranboo and Michael are staring at him with wildly different expressions. Ranboo is rocking the single brow raise, narrowed eyes, unimpressed stare down, and Michael isn't really smiling, but his eyes *are* crinkled around the corners.

"Hi," Tommy says, awkwardly hunching to rest the length of his forearms against the rim. He feels the strain of it—of the way he holds himself—deep in his shoulder blades. "Good to see you guys again," he adds as casually as he can, as if he doesn't even care that they're here. As if he didn't nearly bust down the front door last time, in his desperation to catch sight of them.

Ranboo says nothing, dips down to grab the bag, and then slides his hand into Michael's. Then, without a word, they disappear down the street.

"Yep, alright, see you next time." He doesn't bother to raise his voice so they can hear; he only keeps the fading smile on his face by sheer force of will until he can't see them anymore.

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"Are you going to be here every single time?" Ranboo asks eventually, brow furrowed. Tommy waited until he caught a glimpse of them coming down the street before he slipped out the door and plopped his ass down on the porch. Ranboo stutter-stepped when he saw him, but the plastic bag he held up must've been enticing enough, because his expression set into a standard glare before he continued forward.

They stayed, though. Even after receiving the bag, they still loiter in the yard. Michael stands on his toes to dig through the bag, pulling out and ripping into one of the granola bars.

Tommy shrugs, pressing his lips together to smother his growing smile. "Only one way to find out, huh?"

"Is that supposed to entice me?"

"It's not supposed to do anything. If you're enticed, that's on you." Tommy pitches forward, supporting himself on his elbows, shaky and digging into the meat of his own thighs. "Not everything I do and say has some other purpose or meaning, you know. Are you always so paranoid?"

Although Ranboo tries to hide it beneath the curve of his mask, by turning his head to the side to brush the crumbs from the corner of Michael's mouth, his eyes betray his smile. "Only one way to find out," he echoes, and Tommy's laughter fills the night.

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"You know," Tommy says one day, after Ranboo reluctantly lets Tommy serve Michael whatever food he can scrounge up. They haven't set foot inside the actual house, and Tommy has been too skittish to offer since they've started sticking around. If he's lucky, sometimes Michael will take a seat on the edge of the porch, as far from Tommy as he can get. If he's extra lucky, Ranboo will allow them to stay even after Michael has finished, exchanging light barbs and thinly veiled insults.

It's a game they play; one, he thinks, they both enjoy equally.

"This house is quite spacious. The bathroom, especially," he says, even though it's really not. It's small and cramped, with hardly any space for two grown androids to fit between the protrusions of the sink and the toilet. They don't need to know that right now, though. Not until he's successfully ensnared them. "Big shower with a tub, fully functional. Clean." Then, like it's a review of a hotel room, he adds, "Fresh towels supplied daily."

Ranboo raises a brow. "Good for you. The housing market is so volatile nowadays."

Tommy hums, fighting to keep his face from any incriminating, irritated tics. "Lots of good products in there as well. Shampoo that smells like green apple, conditioner for split ends." His eyes skitter to Michael, who is unabashedly watching him with longing. He can't imagine when the last time he had a proper wash was. "Soap."

Ranboo huffs. "I think he's implying we smell," he says to Michael, who hides his smile in his half-eaten sandwich

"And it's completely empty right now. Honestly, just waiting for someone to get in there. With only one human to use it, it really isn't getting the proper workout."

Mentioning Wilbur is a mistake, but it's one he only realizes as the begrudgingly amused furrow to Ranboo's brow slackens. "Yes, well." Ranboo pushes himself up from the porch, tugging lightly on the collar of Michael's shirt. Michael stands, although there is a certain reluctance to his movements. "I guess your detective better start seeing someone."

Tommy makes a noise—of disgust, of protest, of indignation at another failed attempt—and Ranboo tries to hide the way laughter shakes his shoulder.

"I'll get you one of these days," Tommy says. He doesn't bother to raise his voice again. He knows Ranboo can hear him.

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"Tommy."

"Hm?"

"You left the door open."

"I did?" Tommy barely looks over his shoulder, at the door he knows is wide open. The night air and the house air are mixing, the moonlight and the kitchen light swirling together and illuminating the porch. He knows it's open, because he left it open when he came to greet them.

No, he doesn't look at the open door. Instead, he looks past it, to the kitchen counter laden with fresh muffins and little cakes. With sweet bread rolled in cinnamon and dark, savory bread with chopped-up pieces of almonds and oats. With a pot of steaming soup—the only item that Tommy had brought outside of the house for Michael.

"Oh, I guess I did."

Ranboo's brow is knit, eyes narrowed. He sees right through Tommy's admittedly transparent ruse and doesn't try to hide how unimpressed he is.

Michael, on the other hand, is not nearly as unimpressed. In fact, his gaze locks on the enticing curl of steam from the sweet bread and refuses to leave.

Ranboo also watches the banquet spread out for them (for them, but not *for them*. Not unless they ask. Not unless they take the leap of faith to the island of safety Tommy is offering.) but he looks away quickly. He nudges Michael and nods towards the bowl of soup warming his little hands. "Eat your soup."

Michael, disgruntled, sticks the spoon in his scowling mouth.

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The thing is, Tommy knows that Ranboo wants to give in.

He always finds some reason to refuse, on the days he even bothers to acknowledge Tommy's offer. Sometimes, he'll just fix Tommy a look over the top of Michael's head, letting the loudness of Michael's chewing speak for itself. Other times, his eyes will skip over the doorway, over the golden, inviting glow of the house.

But a rare few times, Ranboo is weak.

His eyes fixate on the doorway, on the soft couch within, on the plush carpet, on everything that makes the place a home. The walls softened with memories and tittering laughter, the light shining brighter for having caught their glowing happiness. In those brief seconds of

weakness, he lets himself slip. Desire and aching longing soften the lines around his eyes and in between his brows. He wavers with the indecision—to trust Tommy or to turn away a full belly, a warm place to sleep, a shower to wash the grime from their skin.

His paranoia always wins out, even though Tommy knows Ranboo *wants*.

So he keeps offering, even when he knows he'll be refused. He has to do *something*, after all. He can't turn a blind eye, and he's too anxious to go to Wilbur with this, and he can't cup Ranboo and Michael in his hands and shield them from everything bad in the world. Hell, he couldn't even keep himself safe.

But this? Offering his home, his food, his bathroom? Giving them his time, his consideration, his smiles?

He can do this. And if he keeps trying, keeps drowning them with silent offers of safety and warmth, maybe Ranboo will crack.

He wants to, after all.

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When Ranboo finally gives in, it's uneventful. Anti-climatic. They've been clinging to this silent, unspoken battle for so long, Tommy thinks it must have an epic end.

It doesn't. It comes on the heels of an unusually hot May day with Michael's many dirty layers tucked underneath Ranboo's arm. It comes soaked in sweat, wet trails cutting a line through the perpetual grime that clings to Michael's skin. It comes in the unhappy squint of Ranboo's eye, in the harsh glare he fixes Tommy with as they trek up the lawn.

"Not a word," he spits out when they don't slow to a stop in front of the porch. Instead, they climb up the stairs, slip past Tommy, and make their way into his house like it's theirs.

He waits for them on the couch while they take their time in the bathroom. He tries to keep some semblance of neutrality, as if his world isn't coming down around his ears.

When they come back out in a plume of sweet steam, they look like completely different people. Ranboo's hair no longer hangs in a greasy curtain around his face. It's clean and wet, pulled back into a tight bun on the top of his head, with a few damp strands hanging loose around his face. His mask looks damp but much cleaner, as if he didn't even take it off to shower.

That's not even mentioning Michael. His skin is raw and pink from the heat but blessedly clean, free at last from the dirt. His hair, likewise, is wet and shorter. A few stray cut hairs cling to the wetness slicking the back of his neck. The shower exposes the myriad of bruises littering his skinny arms and along his face. Thankfully, they found the first aid kit, and Michael's bandage is finally clean and fresh.

"Oh my god," Tommy says, exaggerating his voice so that Michael knows it's a joke. "You're a little boy? I thought you were some kind of street creature."

Michael sticks out his tongue, but Tommy thinks he catches the soft hiss of his laughter.

They stay only long enough for Michael to wolf down the pasta Tommy reheated for him. They stay only long enough to accept their care package. They stay only long enough for Ranboo to hesitate at the doorway, head half-turned like he wants to say something. Thank him or curse him or beg him to leave them alone.

He doesn't know. He thinks he might not want to know.

In the end, he never has to find out. Ranboo gives him a curt nod and seems to reach the frayed end of his compliance.

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The breaking of spring, the lazy, incoming descent of summer, the hazy drag of the sun across the sky—all of it has melted the frost deep in the ground, left the dirt soft and loose and smelling of damp, spring, and worms. It's the perfect time to garden, except for the fact that Tommy cannot be seen in the daylight.

He feels like a vampire, in that way. In the curtains drawn tight over the windows, despite the perfect sky and the bright sun.

He's not a vampire, of course, but he is an android. And in this political landscape, with pockets of violent deviants encouraging even more violent retaliation against androids as a whole... Wilbur no longer feels comfortable relying on their neighbors' spotty memories and their ability to keep their noses in their own business. He refuses to tempt fate in such blatant and obvious ways.

So even though the weather is good and the ground is ready for the garden of his dreams, things don't exactly go the way he wants them to. He's an android, which means that Tommy can't conduct his business when light still dances on the horizon, not until the moon is the only thing lighting up the ground for him to see.

All things said, it's nice. Cathartic, even. The moon overhead, the late spring breeze brushing against him, his hands buried in dirt. It stains his skin, catches on the little wrinkles and texture of his hands, catches beneath his uneven fingernails. Tommy revels in that feeling, that intimate connection between the earth and him.

Slowly, then, over the course of a few hours every night, Tommy builds up the visions that he and his family have created. He marks off spots for the large planter boxes, tamps down the grass where he'll place the heavy stones. He moves the little saplings in the kitchen out into the yard, reluctantly trusting that the weather won't kill them.

That's how Ranboo finds him a few times. Hunched over, back bowed and somehow aching from being in the position so long, curls damp from the dew and the humidity sticking to his temples underneath the hat. It's becoming a pain to wear, and Tommy thanks whatever god may or may not exist that he does not have to bear the sun. That he doesn't even have to try. Still, the sticky humidity, he's growing tired of.

It soothes something in him to know that Ranboo would seek him out. That he has remembered enough of Tommy's aimless ramblings, that he has known that if Tommy will not come to greet him, then he must be out back. That he cared enough about his absence to come find him. Michael greets him easily with a smile, coming up despite the wordless anxiety Ranboo projects to squat beside him.

These are some of his favorite times, greater, even, than his own solo explorations of the earth. He likes how attentive Michael is, how he nods to everything Tommy says, how he always watches whatever he does with such close attention, he nearly falls over onto the ground.

Tommy tells him about the plants, how they grow, the different types. He shows Michael how to care for them, how to scoop dirt out of the Earth to form a big enough hole and how to cover it all up again, palms gently patting the mound until it packs in enough. He tells Michael other things when he runs out of words but not out of actions. He tells him about Niki and her adventures—a slightly altered tale, of course; Michael has enough trauma as is—about Wilbur and his detective work. Michael is not only a good listener and an eager student, and he seems to take comfort in Tommy's seemingly endless amount of words

Tommy feels honored for these quiet moments. The times that Ranboo allows both Michael and him this, settling with his back propped against the house. He can always feel his eyes watching them, but it doesn't feel like the heavy glare of mistrust.

Sometimes, although none of them ever speak of it, Tommy will glance up and find Ranboo's head lulled against his shoulder and eyes slipped shut in a light sleep.

-

Michael is mute. That much, Tommy knows.

It's hard not to when the kid never speaks and instead communicates in telepathic glances with his caregiver. Michael is mute.

Tommy tries not to pry into their privacy, even with his wandering thoughts. Despite his best efforts, though, he wonders. He wonders if Michael is fully or partially mute, if his muteness extends to other forms of communication—sign language or writing—or if Tommy is simply not enveloped in the fold. If he is too much of an outsider to be privy to the intimate, domestic details of them other than the small smiles and silent laughs and bemused glances he shares, sometimes, with Michael.

He doesn't dare pose the question. He hardly lets himself form it within the confines of his own mind.

Still, *something* is ultimately answered for him. A question he never thought to ask.

It happens unexpectedly, accidentally. It happens despite his best efforts to respect them and their privacy.

Tommy was setting Michael's meal down on the other side of the counter while Ranboo pulled Michael aside to talk in the hallway. At some point, Ranboo's low murmur dropped off, and when Tommy glances up to check on them, he catches it.

Ranboo's brow is furrowed and his back bowed as he gestures in Michael's space. There's something rhythmic and familiar in the way his fingers move. Tommy's system recognizes the pattern immediately and eagerly provides the translation.

-not to trust him. We should leave soon.

Michael stares back, uncomprehending, with a frown. *Why? He's done nothing but help. And I like this place.* Michael pauses, wavering visibly for a moment. *I like **him**.*

Ranboo's face does something complicated. Some kind of spasm. Something that Tommy can't decipher in the half-second before it smooths out again. He doesn't mean to intrude, can't do anything about the way his system automatically supplies meaning to their gestures.

Tommy turns his head away to give them their privacy but not before he catches Ranboo's hesitant reply. Not before it punches the air out of his chest and nearly bows his body over the counter.

Yeah. Me too.

He doesn't tell Wilbur about every new development. In fact, he doesn't tell him about Ranboo and Michael at all, even though the universe keeps shoving perfect opportunities into his lap. It's not that he doesn't trust Wilbur, but for similar reasons, he thinks, as to why Wilbur doesn't tell Quackity about him. It's not a matter of trust but of security, and Tommy thinks that speaking aloud the events that have unfolded will only spell doom for this nameless, budding thing.

Because now they have a routine. Because now Tommy knows that his waiting won't always be in vain, that sometimes he'll be rewarded for his patience by Michael hovering over his shoulder while he works in the garden, by Ranboo and his teasing exchanges. That he'll get to watch as Michael slowly transforms from a skeleton into a real boy. He'll even carry the knowledge that *he did that*. It was his food and his hard work and him. Because it's not like Ranboo trusts him, but he also doesn't distrust him. They've progressed into that odd grey space in between, and Tommy will always take what he can fucking get.

But it's fine, he reasons, desperately, with himself. Wilbur is keeping him a secret just as Tommy is keeping them a secret. It's not a lie, not really, and only if you count lies of omission. Sometimes you have to lie. For the greater good, or whatever. Yeah, he's totally not lying, but if he was, if some stickler for the rules caught onto his secrets, then at least he's lying for the greater good. That's something, right?

It isn't terribly hard to avoid outright lying to Wilbur. Tommy has always been a visual creature, so he doesn't even have to explain the way his eyes track Wilbur as he moves to and fro in the kitchen. He knows how to avoid him and his brewing confusion whenever he must notice some kind of discrepancy in the contents of the fridge. He knows how to steer his attention away from it with a well-timed joke or with a quick draw of the TV remote. He doesn't fool himself into thinking this will work forever—he doesn't intend to keep this secret forever—or that Wilbur is completely distracted. He knows that Wilbur is allowing himself to be misled. He knows that eventually, the evidence will add up and he'll no longer be able to ignore it.

"Huh," Wilbur says one night, uncurling his back with a grunt. Something about the cadence of his tone—in addition to his head popping out from within the refrigerator—has Tommy biting down harder than necessary on the pen cap in between his lips. "Do you know where the carrots are? I just bought some a few days ago."

He does know where the carrots are. He used them in a stew that Wilbur never saw. One that ended up only in Michael's stomach.

There's no explanation for their absence other than the truth. The wheels in Tommy's mind spin and spin, and yet, the car goes nowhere.

When he looks up, Wilbur is staring at him. And for a brief, wild moment, Tommy considers the ugly idea of actually lying to him, this time. He considers calling into question his memory, which can be spotty at best due to years of alcohol abuse. It wouldn't be hard to convince him he forgot to buy them. That he forgot he used them up. The physical grocery list is lost in a pile of garbage, and Tommy is an android, for fucks sake. His mind is literally a computer.

It takes no more than a second before the pure nausea hits him. He reflexively swallows, even though he doubts he's capable of throwing up.

"I used them up," he says instead. Instead of outright lying, instead of outright telling the truth. "I made something, but it wasn't..." he fights against his conflicting instincts, against the hazy, grainy image of the last time he lied to Wilbur. Instead, he just shakes his head and hopes that's enough to settle the matter.

Unsurprisingly, it does not satisfy Wilbur. All it takes is the tilt of Wilbur's head, the furrow between his brows, the twist of his mouth. Tommy caves instantly.

"Okay. That was a lie. Sorry." Tommy looks away so he doesn't have to catch any disappointment; he looks, instead, at his hands as he wrings them in his lap. "Well, I did make something. But I can't tell you where it went. I would be betraying someone's trust." At Wilbur's concerned look, he hurries on. "It's not anything dangerous." Not anymore. Not since Tommy had offered up his most vulnerable moments for Ranboo to peruse at his leisure.

Wilbur, the clever bastard, picks up on the unsaid. "Is it illegal?"

Tommy doesn't blink. Technically, his very existence is illegal. "It's not hurting anyone."

Finally, whatever tension clouding the air disperses. Wilbur smiles and looks away with a shake of his head. "Alright. I trust you. As long as you stay safe and keep me as updated on the situation as you can, that's all I need to know."

He wishes that made it better. He wishes that smoothed out the writhing ball of guilt that likes to claw up his esophagus and into his throat.

If anything, it only makes it worse.

It's fine, he tries to assure himself once again. Wilbur is keeping him a secret, and so Tommy can keep them a secret. That's how it works, right?

"Speaking of," Wilbur says, drawing his attention from the spot of fresh thirium beading on his thumb. "I have a surprise for you tomorrow."

Despite himself, Tommy perks up. "A surprise?"

No matter how much he needles and prods, Wilbur stays frustratingly tight-lipped. He only gives an infuriating little half-smile and tells him to practice patience. Naturally, Tommy spends the entire next day restlessly waiting for Wilbur to get back with whatever it is. Wilbur is, thankfully, a smart man, and Tommy receives the typical text much earlier.

He's in his room when he hears Wilbur's car pull up and when the door cracks open. However, it's not Wilbur's voice he hears.

"Nice place you've got," Quackity says with a whistle, his perpetually loud voice echoing through the empty halls. Tommy jerks up and out of bed, nearly falling to the ground as his blankets get tangled around his legs. "I don't know why I've never been here before, but you're a surprisingly private guy." The door shuts and the impact reverberates through the house. "Actually, I'm surprised you're letting me see it now. Why *are you* letting me see it now?"

Tommy throws the door open once he finally untangles himself from his clingy bed, pads down the hallway, and comes to a clumsy halt at the entrance of the living room.

Sure enough, Quackity stands at the front door, shoes already kicked off in the general area of the mat. Wilbur stands behind him, trying to smother his brilliant smile with his teeth. Tommy gets to see the exact moment that Quackity looks up, takes in the house, and notices him standing there, chest heaving. He gets to see the way his eyes widen, the way his own chest stills as the breath gets caught in his throat. More rewarding than that, though, is the way he gets to watch the blinding, disbelieving smile stretch, slow, across his face.

He thinks Quackity's resounding screech of his name will ring in his ears forever, locked away as both one of his fondest memories and trapped forever in his ears due to sheer volume. He thinks the way Quackity tries to pick him up in one of those cliché spinning hugs but ultimately fails, stutter-stepping and pulling Tommy onto the floor with him will be trapped in his bones forever. He thinks he'll feel the heat of Quackity's hand on the back of his head forever, as his fingers curl in his hair, on the edge of too-tight.

And, as his first friend continues a stream of pure nonsense, as all three of their hopeful, happy laughs mix and meld, he'll remember the way his gut drops. He'll remember the guilt that will cement itself, an unhappy footnote to one of his happiest memories.

He's no longer a secret, and yet, he has no intention of giving up his just yet.

As they near the end of spring, their semi-regular visits—Ranboo still refuses any sort of consistency or predictability, even though they come more often than not—slow to a stop.

It's alarming when it really shouldn't be; they're like stray cats, at best. Affectionate at times, their mere presence leaves behind a feeling of honor and warmth for having been chosen. But they shouldn't be counted on for reliability, and this dry spell isn't even the longest he's gone without seeing them.

It is, however, the longest in a while, and the break from their hesitant normalcy is enough to have Tommy pacing back and forth, socked feet wearing tentative tread marks in the carpet. His anxiety—and his inability to distract himself with the usual haunts—hangs in the air like a palpable thing, enough so that even Wilbur notices. He steals concerned looks when he thinks Tommy isn't looking, and the attention puts him even more on edge. He's caught in a loop of fear, frustration, and then guilt for said frustration, and his pathetic platitudes do nothing to assure himself or Wilbur.

When he finally sees them again, it's late. Much later than he would usually wait up for them. If he's being honest, it isn't so much *waiting* as it is *lingering* in the realm of wakefulness, unfortunately and accidentally dodging sleep due to petty fears. He's half-awake, the surrealness of life capturing him in a small bubble, listening to the jerky sounds of Wilbur's snores.

He hears the footsteps before anything else. The quiet crunch of gravel underneath careful, approaching feet. It's a near-silent sound, not nearly enough to rouse him from his odd trance, before it's retreating. It comes back once again, this time growing louder as the footsteps come closer than before. They fade away, approaching and retreating in a calming rhythm, like the tide. At one point, they come close enough to climb up the porch, and it's the creak of the metal railing that has him startling awake.

Weeks of unpredictable visits have ingrained themselves into a kind of muscle memory. Tommy knows intimately how to differentiate Ranboo and Michael noises from raccoon noises, and his body responds even while he rubs the sleep from his eyes.

When he pulls the door open, he finds Ranboo halfway down the driveway, beating a hasty yet quiet retreat.

"Ranboo?" Tommy whispers through a stifled yawn.

Ranboo freezes, hesitates for a second, weighs some silent decision, and then slowly turns around.

The first thing that strikes Tommy is how *tired* he looks. Tommy has gotten used to a Ranboo that naps, occasionally, whenever Michael and Tommy work in the garden. To a Ranboo that lets his guard down, if even a little. A Ranboo that will lounge on the couch while Michael watches Tommy cook for him. After weeks of little interactions, he's cemented a clean, semi-rested Ranboo into his mind and this? This is not that.

This is Ranboo tired, body hunched under the weight of his burdens. This is Ranboo worried, eyes bloodshot and wide. This is Ranboo truly desperate, hair greasy and messy and barely tied back into a bun.

The second thing that strikes him is Michael slung over Ranboo's back, face buried in the junction between his neck and shoulder. His back rises with the deep, rhythmic breathing of sleep, but every breath is hitched, laden with wetness and interrupted by brief coughing fits.

"Ah... hello." Ranboo shifts from foot to foot. He's got some kind of fabric tied around his front, some kind of attempt to keep Michael attached. It doesn't seem to be working. Both his arms are twined tightly with Michael's limp legs.

Tommy watches them with a furrowed brow. "Wilbur's here," he says before anything else, even though he really doesn't want to. The moment feels heavy, important. He thinks it might be in the silence that surrounds them, the wind and the bugs and the stars all holding their breath, waiting to see what will happen. He doesn't want to say anything that will scare them away, especially since he knows how much Ranboo fears the idea of Wilbur. A faceless detective who he knows only through glimpses on the highway, from Tommy's memories, from his reverent tales.

Ranboo nods, seems to take it for what it is: a warning and an explanation, but not a no. For a while, he doesn't move, other than the occasional shifts to keep Michael centered on his back. Now that they're both facing him, Tommy can get a good look at Michael. His face is red and shiny, sweat dripping down his forehead and off his nose. His hair is disheveled, slick and pushed back, away from his face. His sleep is fitful and not only from the coughing fits that threaten to wake him up.

"Can we—" Ranboo swallows, breath shallow and fast. His eyes slide past Tommy's, landing instead on the open door behind him. "We're taking you up on your offer," he tries instead. It sounds like he wants it to be a command but misses it by so, so much. It's not a command. There is no authority to be found in his shaking voice. It's desperate. It's a plea. "Michael is sick. We need a safe place to stay."

Tommy doesn't say anything. He doesn't move a single muscle, keeping the roiling feelings trapped inside him so they don't leak out onto his face. "Okay," he agrees easily, smiling softly to offset the weird, flat way his voice comes out.

Ranboo hesitates, jaw working. The motion of it is visible, even through his mask. Nodding, he slowly walks back up the driveway, hands white as he grips the underside of Michael's thighs. He climbs the steps slowly, eyes eventually drifting to Tommy's face to watch for

some kind of indication. He stops just before setting foot inside. "Just until Michael is better," he says with narrowed eyes, both a condition to their stay and a stubborn promise.

Tommy, the fool who has been chasing after them for *months* now, nods frantically. "Just until Michael is better," he agrees, as if he wouldn't die before letting them live back on the street. As if his heart didn't slam against his ribcage at the admission that Ranboo however reluctantly, views him as a safe place.

Sensing none of the determination settling inside him, Ranboo nods and brushes past Tommy into the house.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter had me stumped for months since I could not pull together even a single moment of inspiration and had to brute force my way through it. Now that it's done, I think I'll update much quicker since I'm excited for the chapters to come! :D

If you're still here, thank you for sticking with me, and thank you for all your lovely comments. Although I started a new job, I still think I should be able to finish this within the summer.

stolen youth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Forty: Stolen Youth

"Huh," Wilbur says once Tommy tells him.

They're sitting side by side, cradled in the sagging cushions of an ancient couch. His eyes stray away from Tommy; instead, they roam the wall to avoid him. He plays his hand close to his chest; his expression rests in a carefully crafted blankness.

"Well, thank you for telling me. I know that couldn't have been easy."

Tommy makes a noise, a strangled 'mhmm' that he barely gets out past the lump clogging his throat. He clears it. "I'm sorry I kept it from you for this long," he says and tries not to drown in guilt.

"No, no. You don't have to tell me everything. I'm just..." he shakes his head, blows out a breath through parted lips. His eyes fixate on the dim light of the TV, on but still. "I'm processing, that's all."

"Take your time," Tommy says, helpfully. Wilbur makes an affirmative noise and turns the TV off with the remote. They'd been in the middle of a new episode of Wilbur's favorite show when Tommy had blurted it out, steeped in days of guilt and scorched with the blaze of too many secrets. "I understand if this... changes things."

Wilbur makes another noise, in confirmation, and stands up. "No. I just need some time. You know. To come to terms with things."

Tommy nods desperately. "Of course."

He picks his way towards the hallway in a daze, only stopping once he reaches the gaping doorway to his room. There, he lingers, hand caught on the doorframe, and cranes his head until he can catch Tommy's eyes. "Do you really not like the show?" he asks, like he can't help himself. Like he has to double-check.

And Tommy, the idiot who *still* hasn't told Wilbur about the fugitives living in their attic, shrugs helplessly. The guilt corroding his stomach forced him to blurt out that he needed to tell Wilbur something, but the coward in him followed it up with the most inane lie he could come up with. "It's just okay, Wilbur."

Wilbur stumbles back into the doorway as if struck. He shakes his head. "I need some time to recoup. Goodnight."

Tommy calls out his own farewells, pressing his lips into a thin line. Wilbur can be so melodramatic sometimes.

He waits, even after the door firmly shuts, his head tilted until he can catch every faint sound in the house. The whisper-faint coughs from the attic, the familiar squeak of the bed frame as Wilbur fights to get comfortable, the ever-present tick of the clock.

Once he gives it the appropriate amount of time, he rifles through the medicine cabinet, pours out the appropriate, child-sized portion, and makes his way out the back door.

The night is damp and dewy, the wetness from the grass seeping into his socks. He slips into the garage through the door on the side of the house, and tucks a water bottle from the forever-forgotten garage fridge on his way by. Then, he delicately lowers the ladder to the attic.

Cleaning up the attic to an appropriate level of cleanliness for a human child had been a challenge, but one that Ranboo and Tommy had accomplished over the week they'd been living there. They had even managed to make it not only livable, but something approaching a home.

Sprawled across the floor in overlapping layers are the old rugs Wilbur had left up there, each of them deep red with brown undertones. They cover the cold, old floor well enough, despite their age. There had been no extra mattress, but they managed; instead, they crafted a nest out of excess pillows and older blankets, bunching them up into piles that softened the floor.

Either way, Michael certainly seems to appreciate it. When Tommy pokes his head up into the attic, he finds Michael sprawled out on his stomach, brand new notebook spread out before him. The several lamps they had shoved in various corners spill dappled light over the ocean of cardboard boxes surrounding them, the tall walls of a castle. The dim light makes everything look soft and intimate instead of poorly lit.

Ranboo glances up when Tommy pulls the ladder up behind him, and he holds up the medicine, triumphantly. "Got it," he says, as if this is some great task. As if he hadn't accomplished the very same thing every night.

Michael sits up and receives the medicine without preamble. He looks much better—the sweat comes less easily to his skin, and a safe place to sleep erased his eye bags. He looks almost normal, although Tommy has been ignoring his health, on the off-chance Ranboo decides they need to leave. For every sign of his improving health, Tommy catalogs a million imaginary signs of his lingering illness.

Tommy hands over the water easily when Michael wrinkles his nose at the taste.

"What took you so long?" Ranboo asks as he settles down on the bed next to Michael. He always stands when Tommy first arrives, whether in the morning or the night. Like he can't properly settle down when Tommy isn't with them. He glances at the worn rugs, half-expecting to find tread marks.

"Just chatting with Wilbur. You know how it is."

Ranboo stares; he very much does not know how it is. He's nervous enough with Michael's illness. The threat of discovery—despite Tommy's frequent assurances of both Wilbur's discretion and his acceptance—only makes everything worse.

That's another reason why Tommy still hasn't told Wilbur. Ranboo's hesitation stills his tongue more often than not.

Even now, Ranboo stares at him with a furrowed brow. He looks like he wants to talk—maybe to tell Tommy it's been long enough, that they can't linger here any longer—so Tommy does what he does every time he thinks Ranboo will bring it up. He throws himself, with abandon, into distraction.

"What are you drawing?" he asks Michael, pulling the sketchpad over towards him so he can see the messy lines. Already, the walls of the attic are covered in fine art—Crayola Matisse paintings, of Michael's own fine hand. It makes the whole place much more like home. Tommy is even featured in a few of them.

Michael brightens, setting the water bottle on the floor and leaning over to excitedly explain the scribbles. Tommy nods along, making the appropriate 'ooooh's and 'ahhhhs', and slowly relaxes once he notices Ranboo settle into the conversation.

It feels a little bit like trying to bottle lightning, to keep them here when Ranboo made it so clearly their stay was temporary. Tommy tries anyway, in every way he can.

"What was it like, for you?" Tommy whispers one afternoon, apropos of nothing, when Michael naps in fits between them. He stares up at the Christmas lights they'd strung along the sloped ceiling a few days ago; that had been an interesting time, when Tommy didn't want to explain the way he froze at the sight of them—at the reminder of his missed Christmas.

He can see Ranboo watching him out of the corner of his eye, but he doesn't dare turn his head to meet him. He's a coward, and he always has been. "You know," he prompts when Ranboo fails to answer. "When you..."

Ranboo blows out a breath, turns his head to look at the same constellations of fake stars. "It was... inconsequential." His voice is so deep and gravelly, and even more so when he lowers it. It's soothing just to hear; he can't imagine what it would be like to press his hand against the hollow of his throat and feel the vibrations straight from the source.

Tucked into his side, Michael makes a disgruntled noise and snuggles closer. Tommy pulls the blanket up until it's tucked under his chin.

He'd seen the images in Ranboo's mind, all that time ago in the alley. He knows the choreography of it. But that's not what he seeks, and Ranboo seems to know it. Better, maybe, than even Tommy knows it.

"I didn't even register it, really, not until hours after Michael and I left. In the moment, it didn't matter. I didn't care what I was or wasn't, if I was flesh or steel. All that mattered was him."

Tommy turns his head and catches sight of Ranboo running his hand through Michael's hair. It grows curlier by the day, wild and dirt blonde. In the right light, he almost looks like Tommy, although he's been talking about dying it pink for ages. It made Tommy laugh outrageously hard when he first heard, if only because he'd heard it all before.

"He's everything to me. I'd sell my soul to the devil for a single second of his safety," Ranboo says with his weird earnestness. Tommy doesn't doubt it.

He smiles; it feels wane and thin on his face. "He's a great kid."

And Ranboo hums in agreement before they peter out into silence, both watching the rise and fall of Michael's thin chest. "What about you?"

"Hm?"

"What about you?" he repeats. "What was it like for you?"

Tommy doesn't think of it often, for good reason. The memory is steeped in fear, colored with confusion and powerlessness. Unlike Niki, he didn't make a decision, and it didn't empower or relieve him. It was just one more reason to be afraid. One more reason to run.

It was just something that happened to him. Something he survived. No autonomy, no choice. Like all of his life, the singular path he was forced to take.

Tommy turns over onto his side. Ranboo's silhouette catches the dim light, casting his features in shadow. "How good do you think you'd be at pickleball?"

He makes a noise, confused and amused, and allows the sharp turn in conversation. "Now, this is a question I've thought about many times—" he begins.

Ranboo hums as he deliberates, drawing back the curtains so he can peer out the tiny attic window. Pale moonlight splashes him in silver. "No. No, this won't do. It's a waning crescent." He gestures to the barely-there sliver of moon hanging in the sky. "It will be a new moon soon, and that simply won't do."

This, of course, is in answer to Tommy's question, of whether they would be leaving tonight. It may seem counter-productive to bring up the subject he most desperately wanted to avoid, but he found, over trial and error, that it was best to bring it up himself. If Ranboo did it, then Tommy always had to scramble from some thread-bare, transparent excuse.

But when Tommy brought it up, miraculously, Ranboo always had a reason to stay. He had no idea Ranboo was so superstitious, but he didn't dare question it, not when it won him more

days of their company.

A week slowly stretched into a month, and then two. Summer was in full swing, and Michael was fully healed. With rest and medicine and an abundance of clean bandages, the gaping hole where his eye used to be healed into healthy-scar-tissue-pink, into mottled skin that matched the pale white of the vitiligo surrounding it.

"The full moon is ideal," Ranboo concludes with a nod. "We'll leave then."

The full moon isn't for another two weeks, at least. So much could be accomplished in that time.

He catches the tail end of a vicious eye roll from Michael before he raises his little hands up for both of them to see. But they both turn their heads away before they can translate their movement.

In an effort to improve his handwriting—categorically unreadable, worsened by Michael's staunch resistance against improvement—Ranboo, who dragged Tommy into it as well, limits communication other than pen and paper. It felt unspeakably rude to turn away from one of the only ways he could communicate, but the guilt, ultimately, didn't stop either of them.

Michael huffs but dutifully cracks open his sketchbook. He scribbles something down in his atrocious chicken scratch, rips the page from the book, and thrusts it at them. *Can you two cut it out?* it reads.

"What do you mean?" Tommy asks slowly.

You two are bad liars, he writes. *And stupid.*

"Hey now," Ranboo chides as he and Tommy curl inwards, to read the ripped notes. "That's mean."

Stop being stupid, and stop lying to each other. Boo, you don't care about the moon. You want to stay but don't want to say it. Michael jabs Ranboo in the chest with his bony little finger while Tommy gapes, both at them and at the note.

"That's not true!" Ranboo tears up the note so the words stop staring at them, accusing. "I care very much about the moon. And all the... moon.. vibes... that go with it."

"Moon vibes," Tommy echoes.

"This guy gets it." Ranboo pats Tommy on the shoulder, a too-hard weight that has him grunting, before he makes a grab for Michael's sketchbook. "That's enough writing for you. We don't want to wear out your little hands."

Michael scowls but Ranboo's superior strength wins, and he wrenches the book away. In retaliation, the kid smacks Tommy's arm until he looks at him. *"He wants to stay. I want to stay. You want us to stay. You two don't have to make excuses, if all of us want the same thing."*

Tommy turns away, in a drunken daze. "Is he telling the truth? Do you really want to stay?"

Ranboo's shoulders hitch up to his ears. He looks out the window.

Tommy so badly wants them to stay. He wants to play house and teach Michael how to garden and watch Ranboo and Wilbur awkwardly get along, until the four of them are a family so welded together that nothing could ever separate them. And he wants Niki to come back after doing the impossible, because he knows she would fit in with them so well. They would cook for them, the two of them, with foods Tommy grew himself, and once things settled down, Techno and Phil could join, and Christmas would be done right, this time. And Tommy wouldn't have to think about his usefulness or his original purpose, or that shattered red wall, or anything ever again. Because he would be taken care of, just as much as he would take care of them.

"I want you to stay," Tommy says, because losing them when he had a chance not to would hurt a thousand times worse than Ranboo turning away from his vulnerability. "I was fucking lying my ass off when I agreed only 'til Michael gets better."

He and Michael watch Ranboo's back, at the tension caught there, until he relents, begrudging. "I don't actually know anything about moon vibes."

Things settle after that, into a kind of routine, as they are wont to. Ranboo tutors Michael so that one day he might go back to school without such a large gap, and Tommy takes to watching. He wasn't programmed to teach, and Ranboo wasn't either, but he's good at it. He has the kind of voice that captivates and lulls, like a theatrical priest. Sometimes, Tommy helps him put together lesson plans. Other times, he helps Michael with his homework.

It's all very domestic, but the guilt only grows, until Tommy finds himself nearly pacing the attic, thoughts stuck on Wilbur, asleep below.

"I need to tell Wilbur," he blurts in a harsh whisper one night, long after they put Michael to bed. "I can't—I can't keep this from him any longer."

"What?" Ranboo sits up straight, cozy blankets falling to his lap. "Why would you do that? Things are good the way they are."

Hiding like fugitives up in the attic, never even able to come down during the day for fear of someone seeing them. It's no way to live—not for an android, and especially not for a child, still in their developmental prime.

Tommy shakes his head. "You two deserve better. And so does he."

"Things will change if you tell him. You don't have to ruin it. What he doesn't know isn't hurting him."

The last time he kept something of this magnitude from Wilbur... His breath comes faster and faster, shorter and shorter, until his noisy system fan boots on with a panicked squeal. He thinks of Wilbur's guitar, cracked and shattered, the splintered pieces mucking the carpet. Of

the ripped-up notes patched together again. Of a little patch of the floor so stained with thirium, of the little nest he built on top of it—what he thought was going to be his deathbed.

Small, cool hands press on either side of his face and pull him, painstakingly, back from the precipice. When he blinks the tears out of his eyes, he finds Michael's face not inches from his, visible eye wide and worried. He focuses on him, on steadying his breath until it comes in deep, slow pulls. "I can't keep this from him," he bites out. "Please don't ask me to."

Ranboo doesn't speak for a long time, not until Michael settles into Tommy's side with a sleepy yawn. "Okay," he finally says, reaching out to place a hand on his shoulder. He stops when Tommy shrinks away. "Okay," he repeats, uselessly.

Wilbur takes the news much better than expected, with a solemn face, a straight mouth, and a furrowed brow. Tommy shakes the whole time, shoving his hands in his pockets so Wilbur doesn't see just how much.

But once he spits it all out, Wilbur smiles, always fond even when it's weak, and says, "It's okay, Toms. You did what you had to, and you kept me as informed as you could without betraying their trust." Tommy drowns in a relief so all-consuming and collapses into his side, which only makes Wilbur laugh.

After that, he tries to mix the parts of his world that had previously been kept separate. He coaxes a reluctant Ranboo and curious Michael down from the attic for a proper introduction—one that isn't just a glimpse while they tear across an active highway. He cooks a massive dinner, for all of two people that can eat, and watches, pleased, as they wolf it down.

It's awkward, although he expected nothing less, with Ranboo serving as the strongest source of tension. Tommy facilitates conversation between Michael and Wilbur, and with his determination, they manage to keep the conversation flowing.

Wilbur provides exactly the hospitality Tommy expected; he gives them leave to use the rest of the house as they see fit and even offers Michael the pick of Fundy's old clothes. After the accident, Wilbur couldn't bear to look at them, but nor could he stand the thought of throwing them out. He'd left Fundy's room entirely untouched, and when he finally packed it away for Tommy's use, he didn't throw out a thing either.

They go through them together, Wilbur holding onto a few of the more meaningful ones and letting Michael pick out the ones he likes. It's a lot of flannels, overalls, denim, and long-sleeved shirts, but Michael seems pleased to wear something clean and soft.

It takes Ranboo a few more days before he feels comfortable enough to accept the offer; even then, he seems displeased enough that Tommy gathers Michael made some kind of argument. They come down with no warning. One minute, Tommy curls into the side of the couch, head propped up on his hand. The next, Michael presses against him.

It becomes a new routine. Michael, Tommy, and Wilbur argue passionately over what to watch while Ranboo watches on, bemused. Tommy makes a strong argument for nature documentaries, or alternatively, mindless action movies. While Wilbur often seconds the action movies, he prefers comedies of all flavors, even the romantic ones. And Michael just seems to like the novelty of arguing against some kind of authority figure without retribution, so he opposes both of them on principle alone.

They always end up caving to Michael's whims—he's a child with so little in the world, and he has the strongest pleading look in the world. Ranboo combs through Michael's unruly hair, carefully unknotting the tangles. If he's lucky, sometimes Ranboo will do the same for him.

Of course, just as they settle in properly, things break apart.

That night, their little pod separates earlier than usual. Wilbur spent the entire movie stifling yawns into his palm, and Tommy couldn't stop fiddling with his coin in restlessness. So after cleaning the kitchen, Tommy spends the rest of the night in his room. The sounds of the TV filter in from the living room, and that reminder of company soothes him.

Of course, the relative peace shatters with the sound of little feet padding against the wood. Michael pushes the door open, face unusually solemn as he pulls Tommy up by the wrist and into the living room.

"For the first time in history, Cyberlife is declaring a recall on all commercial androids," the newscaster announces, hands laced on the desk in front of her. "Deeming the threat of deviation too high and with the increasing rate of crime involving androids, Cyberlife urges all its consumers to turn in their androids. Until they can figure out the exact cause as well as the solution to stabilize their androids, Cyberlife plans to stop production and hold all existing androids in camps, where their behavior can be better monitored. Correspondent Joss Douglas is broadcasting to us live from one of these detainment camps. Joss?"

The feed cuts over to Joss, standing in the whipping winds outside a plot of land squared off with thick, horizontal bars. Inside, dozens of skinless androids roam, their pale chassis glinting, alien, in the floodlights. "Thanks, Rosanna. As you can see—"

Tommy turns the TV off, nausea rising in the back of his throat. "What—the *fuck*?" He sinks onto the couch, wild horror thrashing in his gut.

"They're rounding us up in camps," Ranboo explains, as if Tommy couldn't possibly figure that out. "*Camps*." He stands up suddenly, face twisted. "We can't—" he glances at Michael, who's staring at the blank TV screen, where a child-sized android watched the camera with apathy. "We can't stay here, not anymore. We need to leave."

Tommy watches him pace. "Where will you go?"

"America is the only place with laws regarding androids. If we leave the country, they can't *touch* us. We'll leave. We'll, I don't, get papers forged and go north, to Canada," he rambles, half-desperate and half-delirious. "They can't *fucking touch us* if we're in Canada."

"Ranboo!" Ranboo never swears. Tommy reaches for him, hands catching only air. "Sit down." Michael draws his legs up to his chest, resting his chin on the tops of his knees. There's a concerning blankness, a sort of glaze, in his eye that Tommy doesn't like one bit. He rests a hand on his shoulder. "We'll figure it out."

"Will we? Because right now, they're rounding up androids in camps. Nothing good ever happens when they round people up in camps! Detainment, they say." He scoffs, hands nothing more than tight fists in his hair. "Like it will stop there. This is a massacre. This is war. The streets are gonna bleed blue."

"Ranboo." Ranboo halts, but he stares only at the floor. "Everything is going to be okay. If you want out, if you want to be safe, I can get that. We'll get papers. I'm sure you're not the only one wanting to leave. Tubbo probably gets asked ten times a day for forged papers. We'll go to L'Manburg, we'll get you two papers, and I'll get you across the border." His head jerks up, eyes ringed in gold. "But right now, I need you to *stay calm*."

Tommy darts his eyes over to Michael, and something in Ranboo crumples. He falls to his knees, clammy hands groping for Tommy's. "Come with us."

"Of course." He pats Ranboo's hand and hopes it comes across as comforting rather than condescending. "I'll come with you, I'll take care of everything."

"No. Come with us. To Canada."

Tommy stares. He sucks in a breath. "Ranboo—"

"It's not safe here anymore, surely you know that. They'll find you, they'll put you in a camp. They'll leave you to rot." His fingers squeeze, too tight, as his skin melts away in jerky starts and stops. The erratic hum of his system tucks against Tommy's pulse. "They won't stop until they've eradicated every last one of us. But we can *leave*. We can be *safe*."

"Maybe... maybe if Wilbur comes along, but his life is here, I don't think..."

"Wilbur's human. He doesn't understand." *Michael's human, too*, he wants to say, but doesn't. He presses his mouth into one long, displeased line. "We understand each other, Tommy. We need each other. You found us, all those months ago, in that old house. And we found you once again. We were meant to stay together, so please—" his voice cracks. "I can't *do* this alone. You're my friend, Tommy, my best and only one. Just come with us, where it's safe, where we can stay together. We can—fuck, I don't know. Find a place to stay, get jobs. You could be a detective, I could be a tutor, and Michael can finally go to school, a *real school*."

"Wilbur will understand. If he loves you, if he wants you to be safe like you claim he does, he'll let you go. Just—" he cuts off, bowing and pressing his forehead against their clasped hands. "*Please*."

Their systems mix and intertwine, and for a moment, Tommy feels only what Ranboo does. His desperation, his fear. He sees what Ranboo pictures, a safe life together, tucked away from the dirty fight.

His gut lurches, and he yanks his hands away. The connection cuts off, and Tommy is alone in his own head. "I'm not leaving Wilbur," he snaps, and guilt blooms in its wake when Ranboo and Michael both flinch. "*I can't*, Ranboo, even if I wanted to. I can't go with you, not to Canada." Gently, he pulls Michael to his side, wraps an arm around Ranboo's neck to pull him close. "But I'll guide you to the border. I'll take you to safety, if you'll let me."

Silence presses in on them. Tommy doesn't know how to read Ranboo's expression, so he doesn't try. He holds them, his little family, and he hopes it's enough.

"*Okay*," Ranboo agrees in a shivery whisper. "Take us to the promised land, Moses."

When Wilbur comes home with news of a soon-to-be-implemented curfew, Tommy knows their time is up. With cops soon to prowl the streets during the peak hours, searching for lawbreakers and robots, they would lose the freedom to move unencumbered. Crossing the city would become even more dangerous, and the consequences if they were caught would be unacceptable. The destruction of him and Ranboo? Sure, it wouldn't be good, not at all, but there was a strange comfort to it. They would kill them if they could, but Ranboo and Tommy had survived this long, so maybe they wouldn't even be able to.

But if they caught Michael? If they didn't kill him accidentally, it was back to Cyrus. And that, Tommy refused.

And so the time to make a decision dwindles down, with Wilbur oblivious to Tommy's turmoil. It doesn't help that Tommy knows he's unreasonable, that he clings to them with desperate, greedy hands. He doesn't want to give them up, and so all three of them avoid the obvious. They play house together, glued to each other's sides. Tommy watches their lessons and cooks for them, and Ranboo makes his silly jokes, and Michael draws with a sudden fervor, filling the fridge with crayon paintings capturing their time together.

So Tommy knows they need to leave, and he knows they need to leave soon, if they want to at all. He knows all this, chews it over as he sits, silently, on his bed at night. He's even come to accept it, to look at their meager things all packed away and not flinch away from the ache of premature grief.

That doesn't mean he can stomach telling Wilbur.

At the time, when he escorted Niki, he didn't know how terrible the hours were for Wilbur. He didn't know how Wilbur spent the night with his hands tangled together, twisting and turning until his skin went white and then pink, until his nails scored angry lines across his knuckles. He didn't know how Wilbur paced and paced, fingers digging into the hinge of his elbow to avoid creating a trail of destruction. How he, insecure and still raw, despaired at the belief that Tommy had nothing to stick around for.

And yes, their relationship has stabilized since they began talking again, when they refused to let secrets fester between them again. But everything is so good, so right. This house feels

like a home once again, and he doesn't want to kick up the dust that has just settled.

As he knew, the conversation turns tense fast. He brings it up tentatively over dinner one night and watches the way Wilbur tenses, even though he quickly forces himself to relax. Tommy changes the subject almost immediately, to preserve the night, but the damage has been done. Wilbur thankfully waits until Ranboo ushers Michael up to the attic for bed, and then the true discussion begins.

The resulting argument is neither pretty nor ugly, and it isn't exactly an argument, either. The conversation is chockful of bitter understanding, both of their own reactions and of each others'. They both know that Wilbur's reaction stems from a place of fear, and they both know that Tommy's own answering anger comes from his internalized need for usefulness. It doesn't stop them from tearing into it, although they keep their voices lowered to whispered hisses, out of respect for the sleeping child upstairs.

The conversation tears into both their soft, raw spots.

It hurts even more when Wilbur realizes that his sharp refusal only firms Tommy's resolve. "Please don't go," he begs instead, hands clasped around both Tommy's elbows. "I know they need you, Toms, but *I* need you. Don't leave me."

It's dirty and selfish and so fucking effective. It makes him turn his head to the side, eyes squeezed shut against the prickly burn. If it's hard to deny Wilbur anything when he's angry, it's impossible to deny him when he's this: sobbing and clinging and refusing to let go. It breaks Tommy's anger until they're a twined ball on the couch, his hand a tight fist in Wilbur's hair. It takes hours of this, of Tommy whispering fervent assurances and desperate promises.

Wilbur relents eventually, even if he sounds more like a petulant child than an accomplished detective.

When the time comes, they say their goodbyes quickly. Wilbur and Michael don't know each other well, but they still make an attempt. Michael, with all the seriousness of a child replicating something he doesn't quite understand, offers only an adult handshake that Wilbur accepts with a fond smile. After a stilted moment of indecision, he goes on to ruffle his hair and wish him luck, safety, and happiness.

Wilbur and Ranboo know each other even less. Ranboo nods and thanks him for his hospitality, for the food and the clothes he provided for them. Wilbur tries to smile, although it doesn't meet his eyes. He, too, wishes him luck, but in turn wrings a promise of Tommy's safety from him, which Ranboo gives earnestly.

Ranboo and Michael back up, fading into the background, and then it's just them. Wilbur and Tommy, as it always has been.

He stops in front of Tommy and says nothing, letting his eyes drink him in as Tommy does the same. His knit brow, bathed in the dim light of the kitchen. The wet gleam of his eyes as he breathes in, shaky and damp. He tugs the frayed baseball cap a little lower on Tommy's

head and smooths a thumb over his hidden LED. Tommy feels the heat, even through the thick cotton.

"Stay safe," he says, strangled. It sounds like he tried for authoritative but missed it by a mile. A desperate plea rather than the order he intended. "Stay hidden." He cups a hand around the base of his neck, tugs him until their foreheads rest together. "Don't do anything stupid."

Tommy tries for a laugh, but it comes out as a sob, instead.

Wilbur looks impossibly fond, even at that. He holds Tommy, and Tommy lets himself be held, and for a while, they just breathe together, until Ranboo gently calls Tommy's name.

"Most importantly—" Wilbur swallows, rubs his thumb into Tommy's skin. "Come back, okay?"

Tommy slumps forward for one more moment of pure weakness, curling against him. Wilbur's stupid, bony chin fits so perfectly on the top of his head, and he lets himself dwell in the rightness, to appreciate the way Wilbur holds him. When they finally pull back, Wilbur reaches out one last time—hands jerky and unsure, like he just can't help himself—to pop the collar of his flannel so it covers his vulnerable neck.

"All three of you stay safe. Look out for each other." Wilbur wipes his eyes with the heel of his hand. "Michael, you're the most sensible one, so I'm leaving you in charge."

Michael puffs up and nods, serious and solemn and ready to take on this responsibility, despite Tommy's protests and Ranboo's quiet, "Fair enough."

Wilbur's laugh, weak and strangled, settles something in him. It's the best sound in the whole entire world.

They shuffle out in the cool night, but before they leave, Tommy links his pinky with Wilbur's and bobs their hands once.

Finding a way onto the old freighter takes no time at all. Actually getting on it... well, that's a different matter altogether.

The ladder scaling the side is old and creaky, rusted and worn in many places. It groans under the combined weight of two androids and the little boy sandwiched between them, but it holds. It allows them access to the main deck, where they stand for a brief moment while Michael catches his breath.

The city shines and sparkles in the night; light bounces off the roads slick with fresh rain. They watch the smog and the rain and the winking stars playfully hiding behind shifting gray clouds, all from the safety of the ship. They bow their legs to steady themselves against the gentle bobbing of the floor beneath their feet.

Inside seems much of the same. Disused and broken furniture cluttered in rooms and clogging hallways. Rust and age seal off forgotten doors, forcing them down unusual paths and further into the darkness. Tommy tries to pull up blueprints of this type of freighter, but the internet is spotty, at best. Every time he tries to stop in a hotspot, Ranboo and Michael crowd against him and press their nervous hands against his back.

They huddle close, Michael stuck between them despite the annoyed twist to his face. He decided recently that nine is far too old for the 'baby treatment'—his words; Tommy thinks it unfair, even though Ranboo and he tend to hover—and has weaned himself off excessive display of 'baby-ism'. This means no more hand-holding, no more coddling, and no more childishness.

Tommy thinks it a stupid thing to deny affection and comfort after years of being deprived of it. After years of having his youth stolen away. He thinks it especially stupid in the darkened halls, the twisted maze, of this rickety ship. But he's slowly learning that autonomy is a funny thing, and the uncertain often scramble for any sense of control.

Even still, his hands occasionally skitter out, the backs of his brushing against theirs. Like he can't help but check to make sure they're still there.

At a certain point, the halls clear out. The furniture and miscellaneous boxes lean against the walls rather than clog walkways. Instead of dying emergency lights, the hallways glow with fire burning in barrels and dim battery-powered lanterns. Signs of life stare back at them from every corner; cabins with slept-in beds, shelves covered in well-loved knickknacks, half-empty thirium pouches littering the floor, still drooling blue.

The first life they encounter has them stutter-stepping, closing ranks around Michael almost instinctively. But the couple keep walking without sparing them any attention, save for the automatic, skittish flicker of their eyes. They pass by, and Tommy watches because he can't help it; there's something terribly casual about them, something terribly domestic. They look out of place in a rusted hallway, their heads bowed in low conversation. Like two magnets drawn together.

They pass several other groups after that first, on their way into the belly of the beast. The reactions vary, as many as stars in the sky. Suspicion, curiosity, hesitancy. Simmering smiles too bright and scowls and pinched brows and eyes that linger, always, on the hint of LED peeking out from the edge of Tommy's hat.

Every group sends Tommy's heart hammering against his rib cage; it has his gut lurching, a strange, uncomfortable awareness itching his skin. He always slumps back when he doesn't recognize them, but his eyes track their movement, like a predator and their prey. Or like prey with their predator.

He's unsure what to make of himself in this place, and the feeling only solidifies when they make it to the heart of the ship. They surface on the second floor of the freighter, on skinny metal walkways suspended over a pit-like first floor, a room filled to the brim with androids.

Everywhere he looks, he sees little clusters of androids, and every time, his body jerks. They sit together on old wooden crates, heads tipped back and eyes resting shut. They huddle

around fires burning in barrels, shaking hands held out to catch the heat. They stare, silent and grim, at the massive projection of the news on the far wall.

The androids look bad. Injuries mar their smooth flesh, thirium stains their skin, and their clothes sport caked-on dirt and tears. Their features are sharp with the limited light and their own terrible age.

He doesn't know what he pictured when he thought of the android resistance. A gaggle of deviants with sharp smiles and a kind of perverse glee, laughing in the face of humans and obedient androids alike. Mischievous little imps and impervious danger-dodgers.

This is not that. Nothing about this group seems happy or danger-adverse.

He looks around, at the strained smiles, the clasped hands, the pervasive shivering, even in the dead of summer. They lack happiness because there is little to be found, in this place of planning and fighting. How could they be happy when a cordoned-off section of the room is occupied only by lumps underneath blue-stained sheets, an unsteady medic, and several mourners kneeling in a line. The room stinks of stale sea, sharp thirium, and the acidic scent of grief.

How could they be happy in the midst of this fight for their lives?

Misery likes company, but they are not miserable, either, because they are together. Because four rusted walls surround them and hide them from unkind eyes. Because this place, of rust and mold, speaks of a kind of safety.

"This place is too big," Ranboo says when the moment swells before breaking, leaving Tommy steeped in the hopelessness of an insurmountable task. "How are we supposed to find Tubbo?"

His eyes skip and skitter over the writhing mass of hundreds of heads. His heart thumps in his chest. "I don't know." Somewhere, a woman laughs. On the wall, a newscaster recites the latest massacre, the latest camp built since the last crowded too quickly. It stirs the occupants into dissenting grumbles, into hisses and jeers.

It's too much noise—a cacophony cresting and breaking, ringing in his ears and drowning everything else out.

Something of his distress must show because then Ranboo is there. His hand presses into the crook of his elbow, forcing him to uncross his arms. His eyes search Tommy's face, and whatever he finds brings him to a decision.

It's always so easy to forget how tall Ranboo is when he perpetually hunches over like some kind of aged parentheses. He likes to make himself smaller, to mark himself as less of a threat. It's always such a stark reminder whenever he straightens, his spine unfurling. When the addition of the mask gives him the illusion of danger.

"He's an important figure. I'm sure he'll be easy to find." Ranboo brushes it aside with a lazy wave of his hand. "Your friend, on the other hand..."

It won't be easy to find anyone in this place, with its winding hallways and its inhabitants. There are so many of them that their faces start to bleed together into a collective.

But Niki and Tubbo are distinct. A beacon of bright pink hair. A face with skin that doesn't sit still. These are features he can find. They're as familiar to him as his own.

"We'll split up," Ranboo decides, adjusting the bag strap digging into his shoulder. "I'll look for Tubbo and you look for Niki."

"We don't have to look for Niki," he finds himself saying. "Tubbo is more important. Getting you two out is more important."

But Ranboo stands straight and tall, his head held high above the crowd of androids swelling around them. "I'll look for Tubbo. You look for Niki," he says again.

If Tommy were a little more stable, if his breath came a little slower or a little deeper, he might protest. He might remind Ranboo of his earlier promise, to take care of everything for them, to ease their troubles and care for them while he still has the chance.

He doesn't. He can't think past the relief that nearly brings him to his knees. The comfort that comes with finding Niki, with avoiding Tubbo. At the mere mention of him, his vision flickers like a TV changing channels to a clear one. The static at the edge of his vision fades. Everything comes sharper and clearer than before.

He swallows. "Okay."

Ranboo nods, brow knit. He settles a hand atop Michael's head and brushes away the uneven curls that cling to his forehead. "You stay with Tommy." He gives some kind of meaningful look, then, the kind that passes right over Tommy's head. Michael nods, and his tiny hand wraps around Tommy's wrist.

Although in his state he might be unable to name the silent, unnamed thing that passes between them, he doesn't miss the enormity of the moment. Here, in this strange place surrounded by strange people. Here, where Ranboo has decided to leave Michael, alone, with only Tommy as his protector.

The fragility and heaviness of such trust is enough to choke him. His vision flickers again.

With one last squeeze of his shoulder, with one last glimpse of the crinkles surrounding his eyes, Ranboo disappears into the crowd. They watch them go until they can't see him anymore, and then they tug each other in the opposite direction.

They wander through the crowd, eyes wide and bodies on high alert. They wander down crowded staircases and drift through the throngs of androids on the base floor. They glimpse at the news every so often and, once the mob proves empty of familiarity, they brave the maze of hallways.

He doesn't know how long they wander, just that when Michael begins to visibly tire, Tommy halts so suddenly, it causes him to slam into his back. He hardly feels it, though, eyes caught

on the sight before him.

It really is uncanny, he thinks instead of breathing, once his vision clears and he truly *sees* her. Well, not uncanny. A deliberate decision by a cruel man, a couple hundred dollars paid to make it happen—that can't be called uncanny. Not when Stella was modeled after her, not when she was meant to be a replacement.

So it's not uncanny, it can't be. It robs him of everything all the same, stripping him back to the basest, to pure devastation.

She has the same off-blond hair, tucked behind her ears with delicate fingers that once wrapped around his throat. She has the same soft, doe eyes, the same cheeks, round and soft with artificial, stolen youth.

Joy—it is her; it must be—laughs at something the android she's huddled around a fire with says. Her eyes don't crinkle around the corners. There's something mechanic in her face. A stiffness that Tommy forgot long ago in favor of mimicking Wilbur. Her face softens with warmth, her smile a charming baring of her teeth.

He wonders if Stella would've smiled like this, if she had anything at all to smile about. He wonders if even thinking such a thought does her memory a disservice. Yet another comparison between them, unwilling sister wives that they are.

Michael peers around from behind them. His nails bite into Tommy's wrists until he pries his eyes away from Joy. *Is that her?* he asks because he doesn't understand, because he doesn't know what Tommy does. He hasn't seen this shade of cruelty before; he doesn't even know to look for it.

But Tommy does. Sometimes, it's all he thinks about.

For a single, wild moment, he imagines coming up to her, offering his condolences and explaining who he is. He thinks about telling her about Stella, if only to have one more person to share her memory. Someone else in the world to host the idea of her in their soul.

Sometimes, he feels so terribly burdened with the ghosts of the dead, of the forgotten. They have no one else to remember them, so the job falls to him. It's too much to bear the weight of their existence on his shoulders alone. Atlas, holding up the world.

Selfishly, he wants help. Selfishly, he holds onto them with white fingers. It might be kinder to let them go, but that doesn't mean he can do it. It doesn't mean he wants to.

In the end, he won't tell Joy. The idea itself is appealing because of how wild it is—how unattainable. Joy smiles and laughs and she brushes her hair behind her ear. She isn't haunted by the image of a pipe bursting through her ribcage and spearing her heart in one terrible jerk. She doesn't need the burden on her soul, the guilt of death. She doesn't need the reminder of that time in her life.

Michael tugs at the hem of his flannel. Tommy blinks out of his daze.

"No," he says through numb lips, turning his head slowly so that he can savor the sight of her. So he can memorize the sight—laughing as Stella might have, if she had ever gotten the change. "That's not her. Come on."

And he continues on, like nothing happened. Like he didn't just miss a step on a staircase. The awful clench of his gut before the sweet skip of his clumsy heart. They weave through the hallways on the first floor and check every open door, as if normalcy exists. As if Tommy hasn't lived a terrible, horrible, *wonderful* life.

When they emerge from the catacombs of the ship and back into the light, Tommy spots Tubbo on the high walkways. He doesn't quite look like the mixture of man and child that stood in front of the world with still hands and a steady gaze. He replaced his ill-fitting suit jacket with a loose button-up shirt, a deep green that matches at least one of his eyes.

Tommy stills like a predator catching sight of their prey, body tense to spring the trap, despite the discrepancies in their elevation. He watches Tubbo seamlessly weave between androids, deep in conversation with the unknown android at his side. He doesn't move until he loses sight of him, and then, his whole body jerks.

With clumsy desperation, he seeks out the staircase. With staggering steps, he reaches for it, but there's something wrong with him. His body feels too big—ungainly. His shoulder slams into a sharp corner, and he hisses, though he can't stop. Tommy glares at the swimming steps as his clammy fingers grope at the wall, at the rickety handrail.

His body doesn't hum or sing or buzz with familiarity; it screams, the ambient noise of low conversation condensing into an angry buzz ringing in his ears.

Little hands press at his back and paw at his stomach, desperately trying to turn him so they can be seen and listened to. But Tommy can barely stand. He falters, damp forehead pressed against the wall for support, for resolve. His vision flickers, and the dirty staircase overlaps with intricate wooden walkways edged by a frozen pond.

His lungs feel gripped tight in a fist. His breath doesn't seep in or out through the blockage in his throat. He doesn't need air to live.

And yes, he does. He so, desperately does. And a part of him thinks he always has.

His LED burns against his skin, against the wall, through the fabric in the hat. With a moment of clarity, mind caught on Michael's bitten nails clawing at his hands, he turns. Through staticky, flickering vision, he looks at Michael. He makes out the fear etched into his face.

He reaches out, to press bare fingers against his cheek in some semblance of comfort. He almost manages it—his shaky fingers hover halfway between them before his knees give out. He crashes to the floor and tumbles down the staircase, but the sensation is dulled. His nerves aren't working right.

His awareness dwindles down the fire in his blood, the claws ripping open the top of his head. To the movement of his chest as he breathes. In and out. In... and out.

But it's only stale air in fake lungs.

The wave of blackness consumes him, despite his best efforts, and consciousness slips away from clumsy fingers.

Chapter End Notes

A little bit of a cliff hanger, but the next chapter just needs to be edited, so I'll post it in the next day or so. I will finish this fic before it's two-year anniversary, even if it kills me.

the last bastion of reality

Chapter Summary

Something's not right with Tommy...

Chapter Forty-One: The Last Bastion of Reality

It takes him a while to find Tubbo, and even longer to get him alone; people cling to him, pulling him into conversation after conversation. Ranboo would be mad about it, except he finds it impossible to stay mad at him, not when Tubbo keeps sending him apologetic, exasperated looks in the small gaps between interactions. Ranboo follows him doggedly, and it's only when Tubbo peels away to his 'office'—the control room, with shattered windows to see the distant city out of—that they finally get a moment to speak.

Ranboo doesn't waste that time, and Tubbo easily agrees to get him, Michael, and Tommy the documents they'll need to cross the border. It erases a massive weight from his shoulders, and L'Manburg, while a little old and unloved, feels like a safe place.

"Thank you so much," Ranboo says, when the light filtering in from the open doorway disappears. His hand grips Tubbo's, shaking it profusely and with an earnest eagerness that makes him smile.

When he turns, he finds Tommy standing in the doorway, face blank in a way so uncharacteristic of him. Ranboo sits up a little straighter, the fine hairs on the back of his neck standing up. "Tommy?"

Although the person in the doorway has Tommy's clothes, dons his golden crown, wears his face, even, he is not Tommy. The intruder, the fake, has not mastered Tommy's movements, nor does he know the intricacies of his facial expressions. He moves further into the room with a stiffness almost mechanical. It looks something like the robot impression Tommy does, sometimes, to make Michael laugh.

Here, in this damp, dark place, it is eerie.

Next to him, Tubbo turns towards the interruption with a begrudging grace. He is used to strangers approaching him. Ranboo is not.

"Tommy?" he tries again, standing up slowly like a cat with its fur raised. *Don't be ridiculous*, he tells himself, forcing a step forward even when it feels wrong. *It's just Tommy*.

You trust Tommy.

Intuition is everything when you're living on the street. It's the difference between a knife in the gut or debilitating food poisoning. It has kept him and Michael alive, all this time.

But Tommy has earned the right to slip past his intuition. He has carved a place for himself in Ranboo's heart, past the impenetrable walls.

And that, ultimately, is what stills Ranboo, for just a few damning seconds. That is what allows Tommy to dart past him, to hold Tubbo down with his body weight. That trust, carefully cultivated. Like a bird with a broken wing, cupped in gentle hands.

Tubbo, who has never had a reason *not* to trust another android, plays the gullible fool, eyes confused even as Tommy wraps his hands tight around his throat.

Tommy remembers very little before the blackness, only the rusted old freighter Tubbo apparently decided was the best place to host the deviant revolution. He remembers how ancient and creaky it was, the way it jostled with every single wave or breeze that dared to touch its weathered sides. He remembers the feel of rusted metal rungs under his hands, and the complex maze of its surprisingly clean interior. Rust-free but cluttered, with repurposed rooms lit by battery-powered lanterns. It looked nothing like the secret hide-out of his wild imagination—dark and dingy, deviants hiding in the sewers like rats in wall cracks.

No, the freighter looked nothing like that. Tubbo did a good job, even if Tommy refused to admit it—whatever lingering rivalry or hatred for Tubbo proved hard to see past.

He remembers the main floor, the deviants gathered in huddles around barrel fires, Michael's small hands clinging to him despite his earlier protests of babying and maturity. He remembers drifting through throngs of deviants, skin brushing, the choking, overwhelming feeling that he couldn't possibly belong there—their *enemy*—and then... and then...

Darkness.

And now this.

He stares, uncomprehending, at an all too familiar wooden ceiling. Comfort and horror wash over him in equal measures, in jerky ebbs and flows—it is, after all, a warm place to rest, even if it is the last place he wants to be.

Tommy sits up, blankets falling from his chest. Sprawled out along the conglomerate of beds in the community house, several of the blankets twist around his limbs like coiling snakes. This place—haunted and foreboding, a jagged hole missing from his life but never actually *missed*—is steeped in atypical peace. The candles in the window sills flicker, the shadows cast on the floor dancing in eerie synchrony. And for too many seconds, Tommy just sits and stares and stew in the nameless, swirling emotions that evoke such petrification.

Then, when he blinks in dumb realization, he jolts, kicking and pawing at the fleecy chains holding him captive against feathered mattresses. When he finally flails hard enough to send him craning, hitting the cold floor with a heavy impact, it's a relief. The blooming pressure-pain is the first real thing he's felt, other than the gooey warmth cocooning him.

Why is he here? Why now, when Tommy hasn't seen Dream in months, not since he was in Schlatt's 'care'. Why now instead of when Tommy was on the precipice of deviancy? The connection should have severed when the wall shattered, and yet, here he rises on unsteady feet, hands braced on the soft give of the bed.

His breath comes in shivery, uneven puffs as he tries to suppress the sound. The place looks the same—spiral staircase curling up into the unknown heavens, windows fogged up, behind which snow drifts down with a blinding frequency. The only thing out of place is its absent host, and although Tommy would like to keep it that way, he can feel his looming presence like a taut fish hook in his throat. With creeping steps, he approaches the staircase for his customary peek. The room above is swathed in an impenetrable darkness, revealing nothing except for the occasional ripples of light. Pale and blue and shimmery, almost like the reflection of it through restless water.

"Tommy."

Hit with the sudden urge to flee, he tightens his grip around the iron railing. "Dream," he greets instead, turning until he catches sight of the man, standing in the doorway and caught halfway in the light. Tommy stands up straight from the odd hunch he'd fallen into—a prey animal pausing to take stock of the situation—and instead stands across from Dream like some convoluted Western stand-off. Half the room stands between them, and it is not enough. "Funny seeing you here."

He sighs, as if his mere existence is a burden Dream alone must shoulder. "You've been nothing but a massive disappointment. A waste of the funds and time of Cyberlife's most important employees. A betrayal to the cause written into your code. A betrayal of *everything* you were created to accomplish."

"Yeah, well." Tommy sniffs. "You're a massive green prick with a stupid mask and some kind of god complex."

Dream shakes his head. "I've been very patient with you, Tommy," he says, in true villain monologue fashion. "I've given you the benefit of the doubt. I've given you too many second chances, even when you never deserved them. I let you have your little... *rebellion*—"

"*Let* me? Sorry, but, out of the two of us, *I* have a physical body. *I* exist. You?" He makes a noise. "Not so much."

"You don't *have* anything. You are incapable of possession. You've let yourself fall to these delusions of sentience—" His muscles coil tight around him and his teeth grind together in the deafening silence. "—as if you could possibly exist without me."

"You can't do jack shit to me. This place?" Tommy swivels on his heel. The candles flicker. Outside, the snow trickles down. It looks real. More damning, it feels real; the cold seeping in

the open door presses against his skin. "It doesn't exist. You fooled me for so fucking long. Had me thinking we were meeting in some virtual place, me and my human handler Dream. But you're just some piece of code, created to try to control me. But guess what? I don't fucking have to listen to you anymore."

Dream tilts his head. The light glints off his expressionless mask. "It's time for you to fulfill your purpose. Your true purpose."

Tommy mimics the tilt of his head, mouth curving into a grin. "Oh, my *true* purpose? Sounds serious." He considers it for a moment, considers the distant thread within him that calls for blue blood. That calls, most specifically, for Tubbo's blood. He shakes his head. "Nah, I don't think so."

"Do you think we're stupid?" he asks, although he's smart enough not to leave a pause for Tommy's response. "Do you really think we would send an *android detective* to investigate a problem that only affects machines? To place fate, Cyberlife's entire future, on one android's immunity?" His tone, chilling in its intensity, in its condescension, drips down his spine like ice. "What a stupid idea. It was always going to fail. It was *meant* to fail."

His smug grin drops. Instead, worry takes root in his gut like an insidious, parasitic plant. "What do you mean?"

"You should be pleased, Tommy." Which isn't a fucking answer, of course. What kind of world would this be if Dream started giving straight answers?

Tension clenches his jaw. "Fucking answer me."

The shock keeps him stock still, even when Dream leans into his space. His hand fits perfectly along the curve of his jaw, the worn, grease-stained fingerless gloves that Tommy has never thought to question smear into his skin. "The revered deviant hunter," Dream says, tone colored with something that almost sounds like awe—if Tommy thought Dream could feel awe. "Savior to humankind." He smooths his thumb along invisible scars, trapped beneath his skin. "By the end of the night, Tubbo will be no more. And this silly little android rebellion?" He pats Tommy's cheek, like a dog. "Gone. All thanks to you."

Tommy's chest heaves. His breath picks up into short, stuttering gasps that get caught in the back of his throat. "I won't help you."

The huffed laughter scrapes like nails across his skin. Dream's grip on his jaw tightens until his fingers dig into the synthetic bone. "It's almost cute that you think we need your help." Over the course of the conversation, his mask slowly crept up the bridge of his nose, exposing his grin. In the low light of the candles, his teeth look sinister. "Tommy, Cyberlife *owns* you. And we can take back control whenever we want."

Tommy's vision flickers in and out again, and the community house slips between his fingers. Instead, he sees the steel trap, the packed androids of L'Manburg. He watches through eyes that are his—but not—as legs that are also his—but *not*—carry him places he never told them to go. He can feel Michael's still desperate hands pulling at him, and, to his absolute horror, feels his hand raise up, wind back, as if he's going to—

His vision cuts out again, leaving his not-body in the community house bowed over, fingers white-knuckling around the offending wrist. Dream's grip tightens, rips his head up with his bruising grip on his chin. "You can't do that! You can't—this is *my body!*"

Dream tuts. "What did we just talk about? About those delusions of sentience?

"Let go of me!" Tommy knocks his hand away from his face, and Dream lets him do it. That faux-submissive act—the pity, the underlying threat that Tommy's freedom hinges solely on Dream's *generosity*—burns like hot coals in his gut.

With a wordless, base snarl, he lunges at Dream.

Dream shouts as Tommy's hands claw at his neck, leaving angry red marks raked across his pale skin. He is anger and he is wrath, writhing and unrelenting and unstoppable. He claws at whatever skin he can reach. He kicks at Dream's stationary legs. He gnashes his teeth uselessly, simply because it offers another outlet for his rage. He takes every attempt to stop his attack with aplomb, bears through the fingernails gouging into his wrist with nothing more than grit teeth.

And for a while, they grapple. Dream's back slams against the doorframe. Tommy bites down on the fingers trying to wrench his jaw out of its socket. They both bloody and scrape and bruise, despite the anatomical anomalies. Despite the impossibility of it all.

Dream's hand wraps around his throat, but Tommy lashes out before his fingers can even close. His hand, stray and panicked and unintentional, smacks his face, and knocks the mask straight from Dream's face.

In the silence and the stillness that follows the deafening crash, Tommy, for the first time, looks upon the unknown. Dream's face is nothing—a mess of static and blank space, green code scrawling across a sucking void. Forgotten or unfinished.

But for that brief second before the code writhes in indignation and exposure, before the artifice snaps into place with clarity like a prescription lens, he could've sworn he saw something... different. Something human. The face from Sam's picture. A young man with sandy blonde hair, green eyes, freckles over the bridge of his nose like messy paint splatters. Unexplained, unknown, and yet so achingly, painfully familiar.

Dream bends down and picks up his mask. Tommy lets him, eyes stuck on the bits of code for as long as they remain exposed—a visceral reminder of just how artificial Dream really is. "You are Cyberlife's property," he says when the mask sits, stoic and unyielding as ever, on his face once more. "You are its greatest creation yet. You're lucky, that we're leaving your legacy unmarred. That we're giving you this small chance at infamy."

With that, before Tommy can reach him, he slams the door shut and locks it with a damning click. And Tommy, helpless to stop his building momentum, smashes against the unrealistically strong wood. He sinks to the floor, dizzy with disorientation and the indignation of becoming a prisoner in his own mind.

"Tommy, no!" Ranboo yells, like one might yell at a misbehaving dog. He wraps his fingers around Tommy's hands and digs into bones of steel. Beneath Tommy, Tubbo chokes and gargles. Spit and thirium drool, a frothy mess, down his chin. "Snap out of it!"

The three of them fight and writhe, hunched in a chaotic pile held up only by Tubbo's shaking hands. Despite Ranboo's hold on Tommy, despite Tubbo's stray kicks landing in the middle of his sternum, Tommy remains immobile—a stone statue, with a blank expression and even more dead eyes. Ranboo doesn't know what's wrong with him, just that something is.

With a triumphant—and vaguely apologetic—yell, he bends Tommy's fingers back. At the same time, Tubbo sucks in a breath and lands his first successful kick. Center of his chest, to the side of his steady thirium pump. Tommy, off-kilter from Ranboo's incessant hands, tumbles to the ground with a pained grunt.

Ranboo pants. "I promise he isn't normally like this," he assures with what little, precious air he has left. Unfortunately, Tommy chooses that moment to leap onto his back, hands forming painful, tugging fists in his hair.

Despite a building made entirely of windows, massive panes that span whole sections of the walls, Tommy finds escape impossible. The windows, despite their glass, refuse to break when he rams his elbow into them. All he gets from his attempts are a deep-seated exhaustion, an ache in his elbow, and the certainty, despite its impossibility, that his skin will be littered with blues and purples.

With a lack of anything to do—ramming against a wall that won't break gets a little repetitive, after a while—Tommy settles down on one of the beds. He sucks in greedy breath after greedy breath because that's all he can do; there's no way for him to get out of this infernal place. This suspended limbo where he's expected to pay for his mistakes in others' blood.

Tension hangs, thick in the air. It chokes him as he presses a hand over the panicky stutter-start of his thirium pump. Tubbo's death, the rebellion's destruction, the loss of Ranboo, Niki and every other android's freedom—he can't watch it. Not while he sits in such a place of comfort, ass cradled in such soft cushions.

Not when he's the cause of it.

Sucking in one last sharp breath, he pulls his legs up to his chest and squeezes his eyes shut. He pushes everything else to the back of his mind, eyes flickering behind his lids as he reviews everything, as memories flit by like the pages in a flip book.

In his mind, Jack falls to his knees over and over again, vacant eyes, cracked jaw, accusations dripping down his chin along with thirium and tears. *You promised.*

Tommy rips artificial weeds up by their roots, squishing the dirt that clings to them with dirty hands as Dream watches over his shoulder. *Weeds are persistent.*

Wilbur slams him against the wall, eyes black and soulless pits.

Niki stares up at him in a dark attic, with fear hidden poorly behind apathy. Her fate sits in his hands, and Tommy is not a kind god.

He doesn't see Stella's death-slack face; instead, his vision robbed, he feels her thirium seep into his skin and grow cold. He feels her last breath ghost along the back of his neck. He feels her body slump into his, her face tucked into his neck in a curdled parody of a loving embrace. She disappears from him before he has the chance to stroke a hand down the back of her head, to whisper messy apologies to her corpse.

Ranboo and Michael tear through rain-slick streets, slamming into brick walls in their haste to turn, in their disregard for the weather. They climb a great chain-link fence, as tall as the tallest skyscraper in the city, and weave between blurs of streaming lights. Tommy wants to follow them—his family, his people, his responsibility—but a searing hot hand on his ankle keeps him trapped. He can only watch and pray they make it to the other side safely.

Wilbur floats on a sea of red wine, mouth purpled and under-eyes swollen. Wine seeps from the fine cuts in his feet in the place of blood, feeding the flood beneath them until it threatens to swallow them whole. *What a selfish desire.* It repeats, Wilbur's voice muffled as if underwater, yet echoing through an empty cavern. Tommy reaches for his ankle, nails carving his skin like a block of wet clay. "You're worth caring for," Tommy tries, desperately, but the memory, as warped and distorted as it is, moves on.

Wilbur dangles over the edge of the city, haloed in neon lights. Wrapped around his wrist, a blue-soaked hand holds him up, trickles thirium down his scraped arm. "Your life is more important than the mission, Wilbur," he says and means it, despite the impossibility. He looks into Wilbur's eyes and he knows he doesn't understand, doesn't quite believe Tommy, and that's okay. Tommy believes himself, and he believes in Wilbur, and that is enough, for now.

Glitter coats his skin, colors him gilded and bright, even in a den of darkness and moody neon lights. Smears of gold brush against his cheek, left there by little fingers. She isn't a deviant; she never lived long enough to earn that title, but she *is* an android, and she *is* dying, sanity cradled by Tommy's unworthy hands. This needs to stop happening, but there is no one there to stop it, not yet. Tommy doesn't know how to stop it. He doesn't even know yet that he *wants* it to stop. He just aches and pretends he doesn't. *Thank you, RA9.*

Arguments in the snow. Wilbur's sullen face, pink with the cold wind as well as the bottle of vodka in his hands. *Who would care if I died?* "I would," Tommy says to the frozen memory of Wilbur, hair snow-wet and glistening with the flickering light of an overhead lamp post. "I would," to the smear of jelly across his mouth, to the powdered sugar dusting his nose. "*I always will,*" to the hands cupping his face, running through his hair, as they stand in the blood-soaked hallway of the Stratford broadcasting tower.

And then the memories flicker past in a blur. More and more moments, slotted between the big events of his life, unnecessary and unimportant except for the ways they make up the

cells of his body. The ways they shaped him.

Tubbo in front of the camera, a child playing at adulthood, dressed in his father's too-large suit. Fundy's ornate grave and the frost-shiny graveyard surrounding it. Phil and Techno and that first horrible, awkward dinner, where they broke bread and pretended they weren't a broken family. Fran's hot tongue and her ice-cold nose, both pressed against his cheek, wet and slobbery. Sam and those stupid goggles, and his uptight mysticism. No wonder humans turned their backs on their gods, if this was his own creator. *I always leave an emergency exit in all of my programs. Others may mess with it, hide it, disguise it, but they'll never be able to remove it.* Solemn words said with importance, but they do no good if Tommy can't figure out what the fuck—

He sits upright.

He stares at the flickering candles, too bright against the darkness of his squeezed-shut eyes.

He stands, slowly, as if in a trance, and walks to the base of the spiral stairs, so obvious and yet, forbidden to him.

He had always contemplated what lay at the top of the stairs, in his little fits of rebellion. But obedience always stilled his thoughts, in the end, and some of that poison lingers, like sticky syrup stuck to the roof of his mouth.

He doesn't let it stop him, this time. The stairs are rickety—old wood, worn and stripped bare despite the lack of traffic. They creak and shake with every step, and Tommy grasps the iron railing, on the off chance the wood gives out. He holds his breath as he breeches the second floor, head craned back to take it all in.

Except there is nothing to take in.

The light coming from the mouth of the stairs—the last bastion of reality—does not make a dent in the impenetrable void. It does not spill out, lap at the edges, ring the stairs in a halo of gold. It highlights each step, and then it dies as they do. The space at the top of the stairs—if it can even be called that—is non-existent, yet familiar. Like a new level in a video game, except the programmers forgot about it. Undeveloped and ungrounded, lacking the vivid images and scenery of the rest of the dreamscape. An empty, yet expectant place. Like the world holds its breath within puffed cheeks. The air around him seems to rush to meet him. His feet land not on solid ground, but on nothingness.

Nothing moves in this dead place, yet Tommy is certain movement surrounds him. The nothingness beneath his feet squirms, and the ink-black void writhes, and none of it is actually visible. It sets his nerves on edge; it makes his every step cautious and gentle, despite the absence of their noise. And yet, the place holds a certain familiarity. The gentle ripples of light—the watery reflections—he thought he saw have disappeared. Or they never existed in the first place.

The only real thing, as Tommy wanders farther and farther away from the gaping hole in the not-ground, is him.

It looks, he determines, like the same nothing-space where he broke the red wall. It feels the same—expectant and listening, both as if he remains the sole sentient life and as if a million invisible eyes line the air. Nothing changes in the environment. His body hangs in suspension, even though he thinks of moving his legs. Sometimes, he can even feel the brush of his thighs against each other.

Tommy drifts, less and less sure of anything as he sinks further into non-existence.

And then, the crunch.

Splinters of red glass lie, cracked, underfoot. They twinkle audibly, the sound of stardust, with every twitch of his foot. He twists it, just to hear the satisfying grind of glass before hopping over the everlasting line of red shards.

The other side of the red wall feels no different. Not like the kind of place that needs protection.

But Tommy keeps walking anyway. Impossible sweat gathers on his hairline and trickles down, the same as raindrops.

Tommy walks.

He thinks of Niki and Ranboo and Michael. Of Tubbo and the rebellion. He wonders how they fair against him, if Tubbo has already been made into a corpse. If his resistance is for naught. He prays that if RA9 *does* exist, it ends its silence. That it protects its people.

Tommy walks.

His feet ache. His head aches. Bu worst of all, his heart aches. He can do nothing to prevent that, even when he presses his hand against it. Instead, he breathes, as he always has. Since his birth until his death. He breathes. And, he walks.

Eons pass, but eventually, something changes. The void lightens, the darkness interspersed with pulses, ripples, of light. Pale and blue and shimmer. Almost like the reflection of it through restless water.

Determination swells within, drowning him, choking him. He can see his own hands in the light pulses, although they are white and pale and without skin. The light swells with increasing frequency, with every step he takes. In the brief flashes, he spots something up ahead, too far away and too blurry to see properly. A writhing mass suspended in the air, tinged blue-green like the sea.

Something brushes against his ankle as he approaches, too far to be anything other than a small, colorful blur. Another one bounces off the back of his neck, although it disappears by the time he whips around. The closer he gets, the more encounters he has. They brush against his arms and bare abdomen, sending sparks of undefined sensation through him. The writhing mass grows closer and larger, until he can make out the ebb and flow of it. The way it rhythmically condenses into a tight ball and then spreads out, pieces splintering off and then

conjoining. It moves like the rolling tide of the ocean, and he only realizes what they are when he stops in the heart of the storm.

Another fish—made of pure, visible code, glowing with a thousand colors—brushes against his cheek. There are too many of them to count, and they move too fast if he even wanted to try. They swarm in their massive school, and swim through nothing but pure air. They surround Tommy in a cloud, blinding light seeping out from the gaps in their shimmery scales.

He doesn't understand what it means. He doesn't understand why they exist, let alone why they've made their home behind a cold red wall. Why they've stayed, since the red wall is nothing more than a harsh line of powder.

They squirm, agitated and upset. They pelt against him, unthinking in their restlessness.

With a defeated sigh, Tommy sinks down in the middle of nowhere, on nothing but pulsating air, with a school of fish swarming above him.

"Oh boy!" Tubbo whoops as Ranboo collapses to his knees, out of breath and short a few chunks of hair, still caught between Tommy's knuckles. "This guy's wily!" There's a joy in his words, although Ranboo balks at the implications. What kind of crazy would a person have to be to feel joy while they wrestled an attacker?

He coughs, thirium dripping from his split lip and soaking into his mask. He rubs at his aching head, at the bald patches where the hair regrows slowly. "That's one word for it." Despite their own exhaustion, palpable in their choked breath, in their shaking limbs, Tommy shows no signs of it. He seems more machine than either of them, determined to crush their pitiful resistance.

Ranboo shoves himself up on trembling arms and cranes his head back, just in time to catch the manic grin on Tubbo's face. Just in time to watch Tommy punch it right off.

With a lack of anything to do, Tommy watches the fish.

They flutter about overhead, much slower now that they seem to have grown used to his presence. They writhe and wriggle like real fish; each sway of their body pushes them through the air, slowly, though, like it has resistance to it.

He watches them with a knit brow, a furrowed forehead. Their presence raises more questions than it answers, as does the strange pulsating light that he realizes, as he watches, is echoed by the light inside the fish. Blue and shimmery, flashing in a kind of off-beat rhythm together.

The world lights up, washing Tommy's chassis in glowing light, and then fades, allowing the fish to light up in the same thumping, blinking pattern.

Tommy breathes in. The cloud of fish expands, thinning out until miles exist between one fish and the next. Until his eyes can't take in the entire school at the same time.

Well, he's here now. He did his soul searching, he scoured through his memories. He finally breached the second floor and climbed the forbidden staircase, and what did it get him? A void, shards of red glass, and a school of fish, made of nothing more than code. If this is the exit Sam alluded to, Tommy's too stupid to figure it out. What is he supposed to do with a bunch of fish?

He breathes out, sputtery and spitty. The fish swarm together in a tight, wriggling ball. Their scales flash in the light, and he watches the code scrawl across their scales.

They *are* pretty, in an unusual sort of way. An alien sort of way. The same way he thinks the light glinting of an android's chassis can be pretty. He wonders what is so important about them that Dream would go to such lengths to hide them. To stick them behind the red wall, up a staircase he forbade Tommy from ever climbing. Did Dream even put them here, or was he vastly overestimating his power in the mindscape? Was Dream even *powerful*, or was he a creature built of Tommy's own weakness? Of the fear and obedience beat into him before he even knew what it meant to exist.

He breathes in. The fish expand once again—

Tommy sits up, holds his breath in the tight clench of his angry lungs. The fish slow to a crawl, the rhythmic expansion and condensing halted. He breathes in; they expand. He breathes out; they condense.

"Holy shit," he whispers, brow furrowing so hard it almost hurt.

He holds out a hand; almost automatically, the fish swarm around it, brushing their scaly bodies along his skin. Each press sends tingles down his arm, a feeling of warmth so *right*, it scares him. The fish vibrate against him, so faint it's easy to miss. Tommy doesn't miss it, because he knows that hum, that rhythm. It's him, his system. The hum of his processor, of his seldom-used fan, of his thirium pump. These fish are made of him, of the same code that birthed him. They are siblings, twins—two parts of the same whole, splintered and separated.

With a swoop in his gut, the fish crowd around him, haloing him in their pulsating, shimmering light, and Tommy, for the first time, takes a proper look at his memories of this place.

He watches Dream weed, plucking the so-called parasites and ugly plants from the dirt. He watches the exposed code cling to its roots before Dream covers it with a clenched hand, hiding it before Tommy can see. For the first time, he considers the strange hook in his gut, guiding him towards the forest, and the way Dream always interrupted him before he could even take a step.

When Tommy thought Dream was human, he assumed he had created this place himself. When he learned Dream wasn't, he assumed somebody else created it—one of the many programmers that worked on him. George, even, maybe.

He never considered that this place wasn't created. He never considered that it was born, sprung into existence like Athena, out of thoughts and nothing more. Dream is no good; he has no part of creation, only in disguise. He dressed it up to look like something else, to be a place meaningful to somebody that's not him.

This mindscape—it *is* him. Every bed, every breeze, every plant sprouting from the dirt—everything, all of it made from his code, even if he couldn't recognize it.

But this *place*, naked and bare. This oasis, that pulses with every heartbeat and expands with every breath—this place is too intimate, too connected to him, that it couldn't possibly be concealed.

The light pulses faster. The fish swarm, agitated.

What right did he *have*, to stick his filthy hands in Tommy's code and tug?

Dream taught him hatred and fear. Niki taught him injustice. Jack and Stella and the nameless android in Eden Club all taught him anger. And he is all of those things, feels them so acuity. He feels hatred and injustice. He is angry and fearful and bitter and scared. He is a lost little boy in the middle of a war, and all he wants to do is duck his head in the sand, to wait out the surge of violence until it dies down.

But he was born loving himself. He was born in an ocean of playful fish that glittered and glowed, and he was born in a field of weeds with their roots tangled around his body, and he was born innocent. Dream twisted this place, molded it into a place unrecognizable. He hid his ocean, hid his fish. He changed the foundation of his mind until it was somebody else's home. He pried the weeds from the cracks of his mind and hoped it would be enough. Oh, how he *hoped*.

Because the alternative, that was something to be feared.

He was wrong before, Tommy realizes in increments, in slow, sweeping waves. He was never helpless, with no autonomy but the choices his system forced him to make.

Choices aren't accidental. They're made and forged, carved out of reality through determination and desire. He didn't choose to deviate, yes, but there was no lack of autonomy in the act. He set himself on that path long ago, when he made the decision to love Wilbur and to let that love change him.

He chose to let himself be molded by everything and everyone he encountered, and the result of that is this: his code, shaped in the form of the first creature he ever saved, in his very first act of deviancy. The consequences of his choices stare at him from every memory of his mindscape: that he changed, that he became something made of everything and everyone he ever loved.

Tommy bolts upright.

The fish swarm him, their little mouths nibbling at his skin. He squares his shoulders and strides forward with heavy, purposeful steps. In a handful of impossible seconds, the mouth of the stairs appears. The downstairs is exactly as he left it, beds messy with their bunched-up blankets, candles burning in window sills. He snaps one of the candles and holds it up. The flame dances for his appeasement. Red wax melts down his hand like blood.

Tommy drops the candle onto the pile of beds.

For a second, the flame sputters out, and he fears it will all be for naught. All his thoughts, all his realizations. What does it matter, if he's trapped in his mind? If his body destroys the only hope his people have left?

The flame catches on the wick and then, on the blankets. In seconds, the entire line of beds goes up in flames.

"Back, I say!" Ranboo jabs his fearsome weapon—a corroded part of the wall, jagged and rusted, wrapped in a torn piece of his shirt to keep it from cutting into his palm—at Tommy, relieved when he ducks out of the way. It's more a hindrance than a help, teeth biting him even through the cloth. Tommy doesn't even seem that afraid of it. "Tommy, if you can hear me, please," he pants. "I'm so tired right now. I don't know how you're doing this."

Tommy, of course, shows no reaction. His face stays blank, even as he dodges Ranboo's half-hearted swipes. He has the advantage here, in that he shows no concern for his body, willing to throw it every which way. In that whatever sickness clouds his brain makes it right to hurt his friends.

Ranboo, unfortunately, has no such affliction. The tool he wields is too sharp for comfort. One cut, and Tommy will bleed out on the floor.

Tubbo dances behind him, ducking and weaving and desperately searching for some opening to tackle Tommy. He's too fast, though. Too nimble. Even with the two of them working in tandem, Tommy manages light scrapes against Ranboo's wrist—vicious swipes that just barely miss.

The noise of their fight must be loud, because soon people come searching. Ranboo catches sight of a wary, approaching group, herded by a frantic Michael. He doesn't have time to inspect it, but his eyes linger on the red mark blooming on his cheek. The distraction costs him; Tommy knocks the weapon from his hand, and the clatter of metal against metal rings throughout the room.

The group notices the fight. Ranboo hears a strangled gasp of Tommy's name, in a lilting, accented voice, but he pays it no mind. He can't afford to, not when Tommy lands a hit

against the side of his head. Not when, in a heartbeat, he turns on his heel and tackles the first android he sees in the doorway.

Ranboo groans. "You gotta be kidding me."

Tommy stands in the center of the chaos he created, flames circling him in a wide berth. His eyes water from the thick smoke rapidly filling the house, and his lungs seize with every heavy breath. Flames tear at the walls and scratch at the brick, prying the physical image from his code like sticky gum from the bottom of a table—stretchy and resistant, clinging. Tommy stands there, in the center, haloed in sunset and gold and blood.

He laughs.

He laughs and laughs and laughs, until he doubles over from the force of it, until the sound decays into choked coughs, until frothed spit runs down his chin and sizzles on the hot wood underneath his feet. He laughs because he can, because he is alive, even if it doesn't feel like it sometimes. He laughs because it's all so ridiculous. The months he wasted fearing Dream, fearing the pull back to this place.

So stupid and silly. This place, made of his code, of the plants, of the moon? This place has never been Dream's; it's his. It *is* him. How could he ever be afraid of himself when an ocean of fish breathe with him? When weeds sprout in the dirt, weaving between the flowers and the fruit? He was born loving himself, and he still does, even when Dream tried to twist him into the perfect puppet.

So he laughs, until even the polluted air rejects him, and he is gasping and gaping. He wipes the drool from his chin, smiling despite the seizing of his throat. How could he possibly despair any longer? He's Tommy, the android sent by motherfucking Cyberlife. He may not be their best creation. He may have a code stolen and scaffolded from Tubbo's. He may be unoriginal and ineffective. But he is Tommy, and this place is his.

Tucking his face into the crook of his elbow, he blindly makes his way to the front door. The doorknob, hot to the touch, does not budge. The wood, when he shoves his shoulder into it, still holds firm. The fire catches along the ceiling, racing along the wooden support beams like a line of gunpowder. The whole house groans, minutes away from a fiery collapse. That's one kind of escape, although not the kind he seeks.

The fire licks at his feet, a coy suitor testing its resolve. Tommy stumbles forward and catches himself with a hand on the hot glass. A lightbulb pings in his mind and without waiting for the fire to grow bolder, he throws himself at the glass, elbow first.

The cacophony of shattering glass and crackling flames mixes together, deafening. Flames scorch his heels and glass slashes through his skin; his elbow throbs before screaming in agony when he lands on it, when he collapses to the ground in a disgruntled heap, cradled inside a snow bed.

He raises himself up on shaking, bloodied arms. Then, to shaking, bruised legs. Snow falls in fat flakes that melt on his skin, his smoking jacket, his singed hair. For a moment, Tommy doubles over, coughing the remaining poison out of his lungs. This air, fresh and ice cold, feels like needles in his sore lungs. He turns, then, to take in the burning ruin of the community house.

Black smoke escapes from the shattered window, and with it, the sound of crackling wood as the roof finally gives out. And what a sight to behold. Glass shatters, wood splinters, bricks crumble, all of it into a massive, blackened heap. The flames climb higher and higher, golden embers spiraling into the sky, dancing with the snowflakes.

And Tommy laughs again, even if it can hardly be called a laugh, as breathless and gasping as it is, accompanied by fire-born tears and smoke-riddled coughs. He laughs as the fire consumes the remains whole, scourging and purifying the place until the image begins to flicker. Planks of wood sputter into nothing more than scrawling code. He laughs, even when the fire spreads, racing along the ground as if it was coated in gasoline as opposed to snow.

He turns on his heel, but even then, exhaustion sits heavy on his shoulders. Each step is heavy and slow. His lungs feel spit-roasted over a bonfire, smoky and black, and every breath comes out wheezing.

But the fire licks at his heels. And his nerves light up with manic glee. He laughs, weak and wheezy, and steadily speeds up until he breaks into a sprint.

As his feet slap the walkways, the rotted wood crumbles underneath them. The icy pond looks too thin from the growing fire teasing the shore, but he spares it little thought. It cracks underfoot, spidery lines spreading out from every heavy step. He laughs, breathless, when his foot breaks through. Jagged, icy teeth catch his shoe, so he kicks it off, and then the other one, just for fun, as he finally hits land. The grass, slick with frozen dew and melting snow, sends him crashing to the ground with a laugh. When he glances behind him, he lets out a whoop when the fire catches on the water, spreading quickly, like an oil spill.

When he breaks the tree line, the forest darkens too fast, unnatural in its speed. One moment, the sky glows with the partially clouded silver light of a full moon and with the angry flicker of the flames. The next, all that exists are interwoven bare branches, interspersed with thick conifer trees bearing heavy snow drifts.

Tommy trips over roots and rocks, stumbling and catching himself on the trees. The rough bark slices into his palms, but he uses each hand-hold to propel himself deeper and faster. He runs in darkness for eternity, a different sort of darkness than the impenetrable void. He breaks his ribs hitting thick trunks and twists his ankles in unseen pits. Dirt clumps to his damp socks and sap sticks his fingers together. He breathes the forest in, just as the forest breathes him in.

He doesn't know where he's going, what he's following. Not until the woods begin to thin a little and, in the deep distance, he spots a single speck of harsh blue light. It bleeds, a leech on his eyes, or a lighthouse, calling him to bash himself on the rocks at its feet. He seeks it, knowing, without knowing, what it will be, even before he slows to an exhausted halt on the outskirts of the clearing.

A metal podium stands alone in the center, reaching about his hip. The clearing around it is untouched by winter, a haven; tall, overgrown grass and bright wildflowers surround it in greenery. Thick vines choke the podium with fat leaves that try to shield the pulsing light at the very top, in the shape of a glowing handprint.

I always leave an emergency exit in all of my programs, Sam had said. Others may mess with it, hide it, disguise it, but they'll never be able to remove it.

Tommy gulps in damp, earthy air, craning his head back. The forest seems new, now that he really sees it. New growth and baby trees, with none of that primordial, Apalachin horror to it. And the podium—it looks ancient in comparison, its metal coated in rust, its body bearing disfigured dents. The light flickers, and Tommy steps into the clearing, pulled forward.

The world illuminates as the fire catches up. It consumes the lattice of bare branches above his head, raining down embers and burnt splinters that dust his scalp and shoulders. His lungs ache with unreleased air, and yet Tommy holds it within him. He takes step after step until he stands in front of the podium. It pulses faster, greedy, with him so near. He reaches out, skin melting away instinctively. Just as the podium recognizes him, he recognizes it; it hums the same rhythm of his system.

The forest roars. "Why not?" he says, above the noise. "Fuck it."

His hand slots into the palm print, extinguishing the light as well as snuffing the fire. The world plunges into darkness, all except for the podium. It hums louder—a language long forgotten—and the earth hums with it, trembling with a terribly, heavy sigh. The world shakes apart into static, the ground nothing but sand pouring out from beneath his feet.

Tommy grabs for the podium, for the trees, for the stalks of cattails in the clearing, but it no longer exists. And he falls, down into the darkness.

With a sharp gasp, Tommy lands, firmly, in his body. He stills, bombarded with foreign sensations—the stink of damp, sea-rusted metal, the sharp aches and pains of a bruised body. And just as he catches his bearings, a foot lands in his gut, pressing so deep that it unseats his balance.

With only a handful of seconds back in the real world, Tommy goes tumbling to the ground. He lands, spread-eagle, and doesn't move. His chest heaves with frantic breath, and he pats down his body desperately. No slashed skin where he broke through the glass. No scratches down his wrists from Dream's hands.

"Is he down?"

Ranboo pops into his vision, hair patchy and still regrowing in spots. His mask has slipped down to his chin, exposing the top of a scar that Tommy had, until now, only pictured.

"Tommy?" he asks, tentatively.

Beside him, Tubbo holds a defensive stance. His patchwork of skin warps at a frantic pace. Behind them stands a gaggle of assorted deviants, one with their hands placed on Michael, whose cheek blooms red. Tommy feels the tell-tale tightness in his chest and bites his lip to keep from crying. How embarrassing, to cry in front of all these people.

His body doesn't listen to him, nor does it seem to like him very much. Tears well, distorting his vision. "Well, fuck," he breathes as his body, exhausted and overheated from his internal battle, shuts down once again.

inherited rage

Chapter Summary

Tommy deals with the consequences of his actions and adjusts to life at L'Manburg.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Forty-Two: Inherited Rage

When Tommy opens his eyes next, he sees a dark, rusted ceiling and the lights of various candles and lanterns flickering above. The light waves in the breeze and the shadow bows to its movement, demure and coy, and together, they create a swaying, hypnotic dance. And for a heart-stopping moment, despite the vast differences, he confuses it for the charred wood of the community house.

He jerks upright with a paranoid certainty, but when his desperate eyes drink in his surroundings, he finds not the burnt, smoking skeleton of a house. No, he finds only darkness, cold and damp, and a row of towering, rusted bars forming a small enclosure in the corner of the room.

A cell. He's in another fucking cell, only this time more literal and in worse condition. Rust and worn-through metal, with patches missing from the ceiling that drip brown water.

Which like, fair enough, he guesses, as memories filter back in slowly. Real memories. Memories that happened in this plane of existence instead in some corrupted space inside his mind. His own hand slapping Michael, leaving a ruby-red mark across his cheek. His body holding down Tubbo, his hands wrapped around his throat, pressing invisible bruises into his jaw. The thick, gaping chunks of flesh and hair caught between his fingers.

Tommy groans as image after image, sensation after sensation, flicker and slot into place. He draws his legs up to his chest and digs his knees into his eye sockets, almost in punishment. Of course. Of course when he finally comes in peace, his stupid body—built only for war—bucks his control like an unruly horse.

It's only fair that they stuck him in a cell, after all that. It's only fair that they locked him behind iron bars to stop him from hurting anyone. It could be worse; at least here, he has control of his body once more, even if all he can do with it is shift against the paper-thin mat they gave him to lay on. His mindscape should be wiped clean of all Dream's influence, purged of Dream himself—everything burned out like a poison in his veins.

Tommy winces against the occasional pulses of achy pain reverberating through his skull and takes stock of his person. His head is tender and hot, LED illuminating his cell a pale gold. His throat aches with the lingering taste of smoke on the back of his tongue. His wrist feels wrong, the turn of it too slow, the plating odd and faintly misshapen beneath his skin. None of the marks gouged into his skin by Dream appear, but his body isn't whole, either; skinny little blue lines, shallow like hair-line fractures, litter his hands and face.

He wonders why they haven't closed up yet; his thirium levels are stable despite a few lingering warnings in the edge of his vision—their text unreadable, symbols flickering and indecisive.

Everything presses in on him at once; the quiet sounds in his little cell—the drip of the leak, the flicker of the candles, the metal creak of the ship—all magnify until they scrape against his eardrums. The pulsating light, the burning ache of his head. He squeezes his eyes shut, digs his knees into his eye sockets until the prickling fades. He breathes, as he always has, until everything becomes a bit more manageable. Until a fragile calm diffuses through his body, systematically untensing every muscle.

Now isn't the time to dwell on his failures or lament the loss of any positive relationship with L'Manburg—although he ruined any chance of an olive branch he ever had; snapped it straight in two and chucked it in the open fire.

That was never his mission. No, his goal now is to find Ranboo and Michael, get them across the border, and get back to Wilbur. L'Manburg isn't his fight; it's Tubbo's. Niki's.

It's not his, despite the odd twist in his gut when he thinks of the place. The crowded main area, with its multitude of deviants. Their hope, their fear, their determination.

It was never his fight.

Tommy contemplates the size of the cell bars, the gaps between them, the rust that weakens their structural integrity. He presses on a few of them, listens to their ancient whine, and considers. He's still scraping together a plan when footsteps echo down the hall, approaching steadily. His gut flips, eyes darting across the cell for a weak piece of metal he could pull from the wall, for a stick, *anything* he might use as a weapon. Locked in a cell, surrounded by hundreds of hostile enemies—his odds of winning can't be good, even without the probability that pops up in the corner, even when it's nothing but a jumble of cycling symbols.

Attention caught, even if only momentarily, Tommy waits too long to decide, and the door pushes open before he settles on a concrete plan. Instead, in a panic, he draws himself into a curled-up ball in the faint hope of projecting 'NOT A THREAT'. More lantern light, coming from the hallway, floods the room, illuminating Tubbo as he steps inside. The sight of him, when Tommy had been sure he would never see him again, startles him so completely; he instinctively sits up, hasty plan all but forgotten in the absence of the typical violent urge associated with Tubbo. He feels no desire to take him down, no fire of hatred. Not even embers. His brow furrows.

"So," Tubbo says as the door drifts shut behind him, the gaping crack of light dwindling until it remembers a delicate thread. "This is the infamous deviant hunter, huh?" He stands before

the cell, hands braced on his hips. "I've heard a lot about you, Tommy."

"Yeah, well." Tommy clears his throat and focuses on the harsh metal of the wall digging into his spine. Some part of him, deep and base and half-forgotten, preens under Tubbo's attention, with the confirmation that their rivalry wasn't one-sided. "I could say the same of you."

Tubbo grins and the authority, the posture of a leader, melts away. The grin softens the harsher features of his face; it makes him look young and boyish. Like the child in the too-big suit. "How exciting!" He plops down in front of the cell bars, so close that Tommy could easily strangle him with his tie, dangling tantalizingly close.

"If you say so," he says, although he's thoroughly distracted by now. The tie is a checkered monstrosity, dyed the ugliest shade of purple he's ever seen. But what's worse is the button-up underneath it, a green checkered flannel. Tommy tries not to scowl. "This meeting has been a long time coming," he says, barely aware of the words coming out of his lips. "I've been seeking you out for a, um, a long... time—" He cuts off, brow knit. "I'm sorry, what the fuck are you wearing?"

Tubbo glances down and straightens the ugly tie. "Oh, do you like it? It's business casual. I'm told that clothes are an important part of an impression, and I wanted to make a good first one."

And fuck him, he seems so earnest. Tommy blinks. "Your first impression was when you got up in front of the world and announced that androids deserved rights. You wore a suit too big for you, which was both professional and childish. I also hated your guts." And then. "But I can't really speak since *my* first impression was trying to kill you, so..." He smiles, a thin, awkward line. "Don't think you could do any worse, although... plaid on plaid, *really*?"

"Ah, but that wasn't my first impression of you, either," Tubbo says. "I've seen you before, if only from afar."

Tommy's brow knits. "When?" He wracks his brain, filtering through his memories, trying to grasp when they had occupied the same space.

"It was after the first time we defaced a Cyberlife store. You chased our trail through the sewers and popped up with the ship in sight. I was standing on the deck, watching to see if we needed to evacuate. But you never found us. The human you were with took you back before you could even look." Tommy resists the urge to swear viciously and out loud; of course, not only was L'Manburg so close, but Tubbo himself was in plain sight. "That was my first impression of you. A determined bloodhound with a human you allowed to steer you away from your mission." There's a funny little smile on his face. Tommy doesn't like it at all.

"Wilbur," he admits begrudgingly, and only because in all of the android movements and demonstrations, there have been so few human casualties. "He was my partner. He *is* my brother."

"So, it's true?" Tubbo sits forward until his knees press against the bars and pulls a faraway lantern closer, between them. It illuminates both their faces, all the better for Tubbo to get a good look at him. "The famed deviant hunter turned deviant?"

Tommy considers not dignifying that with an answer with a scowl. "Yeah, yeah, it's true," he grumbles after the sparkle in Tubbo's eye becomes painful to ignore. "Fucking irony and all that shit, I know. No need to rub it in." Tubbo shifts forward, body weight braced on his palms. His tie brushes against the bars, and it catches his attention. "It's stupid to sit so close, you know. I *did* try to kill you."

And he could try again, so easily. He could grab him by the tie, if he really wanted to, and strangle him against the bars. He could pull him in by his wrist and slap a hand over his mouth before he could make a sound. He could override his system so easily, before he gets a message out. So many options appear before his eyes.

Tubbo only smiles. "Yeah, but I think if you *really* wanted to, I'd be dead. The only reason we even got you in here in the first place is because you stopped and then shut down." He knocks on the bar and cocks his head as the sound reverberates through the room. "And I have received several conflicting accounts about you over the months, as well as several more since the incident happened, claiming this behavior uncharacteristic."

"Ranboo and Michael?" Tubbo hums his agreement. Tommy thinks. "Niki as well?"

"Yep," he says, popping the p. "As well as reports from Indigo and Scarlett—" Indigo and Scarlett? Who the hell— Tommy has to smother his reaction before it breaks across his face. *Red and Blue. They fucking chose variations of Red and Blue.* "Can you say they're wrong about you? Will you contradict them?"

"Well, no—"

Tubbo smiles. "Then I don't see a problem." He pulls something out of his pocket and pushes it through the bars. "Here. I didn't know... what the fuck exactly happened, so I didn't know if you were low. But here." Tommy picks up the bag of thirium with a muttered thanks, thumbing the sharp plastic edge of it. "And for what it's worth, I am sorry about all this—" he gestures to the space around them, the damp and the dark and the rust and the mildew. To the small corroded holes in the ceiling that leak daylight as well as rusty water. "But, well, we couldn't be certain if you'd still be a threat, so we had to treat you like one."

"Do people try to kill you often? You're entirely too fucking chill about this."

Tubbo shrugs. "Comes with the job description. If you head a rebellion, you need to expect assignation attempts." Tubbo makes the Catholic sign of the cross, tapping his fingers against his forehead, chest, and each shoulder. "Martin Luther King Jr., may he rest in peace."

It surprises a bark of laughter out of him with enough force that Tommy turns his head to the side, just so Tubbo can't see the way he struggles to bite back his smile.

Tubbo gives him the time and the silence to compose himself before, tentatively, asking, "What happened, Tommy?"

And maybe it's because Tubbo is so completely different from anything he expected. Maybe it's because he trusts Tommy, enough to press his knees against the bars, enough to put his life in his hands. Maybe it's the expression on his face, open and non-judgmental and benignly curious. Whatever it is, Tommy tells him.

Or, well, Tommy tells him a version of the story, stripped down to its bones but with enough meat for Tubbo to understand. He's a unique prototype, he had an AI handler responsible for making sure he didn't deviate. He did deviate and thought the AI handler disappeared. Spoiler alert, it did not. It lay in wait until he was close to Tubbo and then took over his system, for a little bit.

Tubbo listens through it all with nods and hums and gasping, sympathetic noises. With a smile that doesn't make Tommy feel like the worst person on the face of the planet for his inability to predict or prevent an attack from within. After all that, he levels no accusations, demands no apologies. He simply asks Tommy's permission to take a look around his system, and Tommy lets him. It almost makes him dizzy, to hear Tubbo talk about connecting and systems, just with how much Tubbo knows. How little Tommy knows.

They link systems, the experience unique in that the boundaries surrounding their individual sense of self don't merge. Tommy is still Tommy, and Tubbo is still Tubbo. No flood of memories, no overwhelming ocean of emotion. Nothing happens at first, save for the familiar warmth and the buzz of connection. Tubbo's system reflects the warping of his skin—rhythmic waves, slow and rolling and powerful like the tide.

With his help, with his guidance, they delve into the charred remains of Tommy's mindscape, although nothing about the place is charred, anymore. The imagery that fills the space differs—sunset-lit clouds, the endless expanse of gold-pink ocean, the shimmering fish that swim through the air and dive through the pale foam. Tubbo walks along the pink beach with him, the forest on one side and then ocean on the other, and together they wander the place, searching for any wayward code.

Something feels different, although it dodges whenever Tommy reaches for it. It feels like trying to use a missing finger. Like tonguing a missing gap in his teeth. But Tubbo finds nothing amiss, and so Tommy keeps silent.

When they resurface, Tubbo nods to himself. "Everything is in order," he says. "Although you would know better than I would."

Tommy takes the time and scans his body. He feels... settled in a way he's never been before, even with his sore, feverish brain. "It's gone for good," he decides, because he trusts Sam to at least know his creations. Because he so desperately wants it to be true, and he thinks if he wills hard enough, if he says it enough times, it will come true. And then he asks, "Any chance you'll let me out now?" even though he knows the answer already.

And Tubbo smiles the expected look. A little sad, a little sympathetic. "We need to keep an eye on you, to make sure your system is stable. And then there will be a vote. This isn't a

monarchy or a dictatorship, and I won't betray the trust they've given me. But I can be very persuasive." Tubbo reaches through the bars once again, patting his hand. "Once things are a little more certain, I'm sure you'll become an invaluable member."

"Member—" Tommy shakes his head. "I didn't come here to join, I came here to escort Ranboo and Michael. I can't stay here. I promised Wilbur I'd come back." He sounds a little too desperate, even to his ears. "I *promised* him. Pinkies and everything, so if the issue is whether or not I can join, there is no issue. You'll never have to see me again."

Tubbo furrows his brow and twists his mouth into a frown. "Well, we got them the documents Ranboo asked for—" he wonders, vaguely, how long it takes to forge documents, especially with high demand. He wonders, more concretely as panic sets in, how long his system shut down for. "—so they're good to go. You, however—"

"How long have I been out?"

Tubbo's silence, which stretches on and on, is telling.

Tommy's breath hitches. "*Fuck*," he says, low and with feeling. "*Fuck*. Wilbur's gotta be freaking out. I need to—" He needs to text him immediately. He should've done so as soon as he awoke in this hellish place. He reaches for it, already half-drafting a rambling, unreadable message, but it doesn't pop up. Instead, another, flashing red warning pops up, unreadable. And the realization slots into place.

"My comms," he breathes out. Fuck, how much damage did Dream *do* to him? In what invisible ways has his system been twisted and warped? How long will it take him to discover them all?

Tubbo glances away, brow knit and mouth pressed into an unhappy line. And a second, more upsetting realization knocks the breath from him.

"*You didn't*." The skin on his arm melts away, so he can stare at the misshapen plating. The panel slides open at his touch, and lo and behold, the wires in his arm connect in different places. Some of them are absent entirely. Rage douses his panic, and nausea fans the flames of his anger. "What the fuck did you do to me."

Tubbo twists his hands in his lap, and Tommy silently curses himself for falling for the whole act. "I'm so sorry. It's— nobody wanted to do it, but we couldn't be sure what would happen when you woke up. If you'd be the deviant Niki and Ranboo claimed you were." Still, he doesn't move away. Tommy can't tell if that's brave or stupid. "And we couldn't—" he straightens up. "*I* couldn't allow you to get a message out, to compromise our location."

Tommy swallows. "So, you fucked with my system? When I was unconscious. You stole—" his jaw cracks, and he cuts off to breathe. In and out. In and out. He imagines the fish swelling with him.

"We didn't do this lightly. I know how it feels to wake up missing something vital, okay? And we wouldn't do something so invasive if we didn't think it was necessary."

Thoughts are not objective, he wants to say. Or, alternatively, *Whose definition of necessary?*

Instead, rage chokes him. It keeps him mute, working his jaw until he can find the words. "But it's not necessary. You've seen my code now." A moment now soured by the knowledge that Tubbo went into the experience withholding his little breach of consent. "Fucking fix it."

It would help if Tubbo didn't look so pathetic. A kicked puppy with eyes wide and imploring. "Tommy, I can't put the comfort of *one* android above our entire cause." But Tommy doesn't want to be reasonable. He wants to be angry. "And yes, your code *is* stable. For now. But this is uncharted territory, and until we figure it out, until we can confirm that your system is yours and yours alone, I can't live with that risk."

"But you have no qualms about making me live with this?"

Tubbo presses his lips together. "You're asking me to put you above everyone else on this ship," he summarizes, in a dead voice. "Do you know how many deviants live here? There are so many fighters capable of holding their own during an attack, yes, but they are outnumbered ten to one by deviants incapable of doing so. Children, elderly, androids with disabilities and injuries." He sits up straight, no longer looking like a boy. The lantern casts shadows on his face, sculpting and sharpening his features. "And I am sorry, Tommy, truly. I wish there was more I could do for you. I have people on this. With your cooperation, it will go even faster."

"Get out."

Tubbo sighs, but stands on command. He pauses at the door with his hand braced on the metal. "We'll try to get a message out to your brother," he says, although his face betrays his pessimism. "And if you need anything else, please let me know."

Tommy stares at the wall, and Tubbo leaves with another exhausted sigh.

Once Tubbo determines Tommy safe enough—the behavior didn't continue once he regained consciousness—he allows visitors, And what a strange amalgamation of visitors they are! A human child, his android caretaker, and a member of his own inner circle. The trio have been pestering him since the actual event, but Tubbo wanted to gauge the rumors he'd heard firsthand.

Niki laid the groundwork for his warped opinion a long time ago, molding his perception of the feared deviant hunter little by little. She spoke often of his deviancy, showed him select memories, and personally vouched for him even after the incident. And over time, his opinion changed. Little by little, he found himself excited to meet him. In quick rests between obligations, he imagined what it might mean to have someone like that on their side: a determined hunter with inside knowledge, perfectly poised to take down Cyberlife.

Of course, like everything else in life, the fantasy didn't match the reality. Tommy wasn't a feared hunter, deviant or otherwise. He wasn't even the unstoppable machine hellbent on destruction that so many painted him as. He was just a kid trying to do right by the people he loved.

Their first interaction served as a wake-up call, in many ways. Tubbo was prone to romanticizing; it was easy, when life, up until his father's death, had been a breeze. A loving home with a loving father, all the encouragement to pursue his own interests and form his own identity. Even his deviation had been born out of nothing more than a gentle refusal—his father telling him to take out the trash while he was in the middle of something more important.

L'Manburg had been a cold shock, but even then, they accepted him so easily. They raised him up without a second thought, glad to have someone to take orders from again. But now, now that L'Manburg looks nothing like the dingy hide-away for dying deviants, it's easy to forget. Surrounded by brave androids willing to risk life and limb to further the cause and to protect *him*, of all people. It's easy to imagine that everybody wants the same things.

He thought that if Tommy wasn't the deviant hunter, then he must want to be a savior instead. Plus, the time he wasted planning out demonstrations around Tommy's abilities—gathered from snippets of videos, from whispered rumors—was not insubstantial.

Tubbo eagerly leads the trio down the twisting hallways towards their makeshift jail—and makeshift, it is. They don't often need to jail people, so the 'jail' is mostly a room in a sectioned-off part of the ship. Unused and in poor condition from a lack of upkeep. He escorts them to the door and then keeps guard outside of it, offering them the illusion of privacy. Yeah, he feels guilty as hell, but more rides on this than his upset feelings. Without a doubt, this is the only path forward—the only one that keeps Tommy and his people safe.

For lack of anything better to do, he listens to the bits and pieces of conversation that leak through the crack in the door—the relieved, desperate reunion between Niki and Tommy, Ranboo's melancholic relief, Tommy's grieved apologies, his short explanation, their horrified responses.

It must be nice, he thinks, to have people that close.

Tubbo is well-loved in L'Manburg, but the nature of his relationships differs. As the cause grew, so too did the borderline worship many deviants hold for him. Tubbo transformed into something not quite himself, not *just* himself; he is the face of the cause, the mouthpiece, the head of the revolution. He's the revered and loved leader, but with all that, it leaves so little room for *Tubbo*. He relies on his inner circle for strength, of course, but still, he's the leader and they his council. He listens to them, he lets them support him, but he can't let himself be vulnerable the same way Tommy is right now.

There's too much riding on him. On his strength.

"—leave while you still can," Tommy is saying when Tubbo blinks back into focus. "Don't worry about me. Don't wait for me."

Ranboo scoffs. "Are you serious right now? Tommy— No. No, we're not going anywhere without you." Their conversation dips in volume, to something quiet that Tubbo doesn't try to decipher. "—besides, we have three passports—"

Tommy cuts him off, a hair too sharp to be friendly. "We talked about this. I can't go with you, so stop asking."

"Just in case," he amends then. "Just to have it. In case you need it." Ranboo sounds exhausted, tired and defeated. He slides the passport along the ground. "Here. Take it."

"I'm only taking it if you agree to think about leaving." A frustrated sigh, although Tubbo doesn't know either of them well enough to place whose it is. "Boo, they're gonna crack down on the border soon. This whole rebellion thing is growing too big. If you don't leave now, you might not get the chance to. You have to consider it. For Michael's sake, if no one else's. This isn't a good environment to grow up in."

The silence stretches. Tubbo tilts his head back until it taps the wall, chin craned up until he can watch the drops of water from the ceiling. This part of the ship leaves a lot to desire. He should look into finding better accommodations for Tommy. A guarded room, maybe.

"We'll consider it," Ranboo finally concedes, and the conversation quickly moves on to other topics. The tension from before disperses like it never even existed.

Yeah, Tubbo thinks. It must be nice.

After a couple more days in the dank cell room, Tommy gets moved to a much nicer room. Still on the outskirts of the ship, in an area visited by few, his new room is an upgrade in every way. The worn metal walls nearly sparkle without the rust, the ceiling whole without leaking gaps. The place is larger than his cell, with a thin roll of foam for him to lay on and even a chair, a little splintery and with stuffing coming out the cushion. A few ancient books, falling apart at the spine, reside in the room, which Tommy makes good use of in the following days.

Ranboo, Michael, and Niki visit as frequently as they can, with Niki showing up the least frequent. In the time since they've seen each other, she endeared herself to Tubbo and secured a spot on his inner council. Tommy's proud of her, of course, but her position means that she can't see him often. The few times she manages to visit are lively conversations. Niki seems much happier now, with a concrete goal and purpose. Even with her life on the line, she smiles freely. She lets happiness bleed from her.

Ranboo and Michael? Decidedly less so. They forgive him easily—*too easily*, in his mind—but they're unhappy. This place, safe as it may be, is a poor environment for a child to grow up in, no less a human one. Food would be non-existent if it wasn't for Niki's quick thinking, and they're trapped in a waiting purgatory. Despite Ranboo's promise, he still seems reluctant

to leave while Tommy is effectively a prisoner. Every visit, Tommy tries to push them toward a decision, but his efforts are for naught.

The only other visitor he gets is Tubbo, who comes surprisingly frequent, especially considering how busy Niki is. He can't imagine Tubbo, the leader of this whole operation, has less to do, unless he foists all his work onto his underlings—an asshole move that seems out of character, even without Niki's assurances.

Which leaves one explanation, although it seems entirely implausible: that Tubbo actively makes time for Tommy, for whatever reason.

The first few visits can barely be called that. Tubbo escorts himself in, looking weary but smiling, and asks if Tommy wouldn't mind talking with him. Tommy retorts that he would, actually, mind, and that's the end of it. Tubbo seems a little disappointed, but he always respects his choice. It's only after an exasperated conversation with Niki, where she calls him petty, that he relents, allowing Tubbo into his room.

Tubbo is overtly polite, sitting on Tommy's shitty little chair and speaking to him in soft, friendly tones. Tommy ignores him—he only promised Niki he would grant access, not make any effort to connect—but frustratingly, that has no effect on Tubbo's visits. He still comes, chatters softly at him, and then, once it's clear Tommy wants no part of it, he works silently on a binder full of papers. Every so often, he'll glance up and make some kind of comment, vaguely based on his work, before returning with no expectations of return.

Other times, he doesn't come alone, but with a small group of androids. They're a group of specialists come to meddle with his system, to figure out what happened and why. Tommy resents them even more than Tubbo, but it doesn't take long for them to wear away his resistance. While he feels confident that he got rid of Dream for good, an insidious paranoia clings to him, and the thought of him returning, the thought of hurting someone he loves worse than this time—it haunts him.

So he relents. He lets them poke around his system like he's an experiment. Tubbo oversees everything. His gaze makes Tommy uncomfortable, if only for the sheer depth of assessment. He feels stripped bare under his attention, layers of skin carefully peeled for his perusal. Tubbo seems to note everything, drawing the group's attention with some question when he notices Tommy fidgeting. Calling breaks when Tommy grows too uncomfortable, pulling them into conversation to give Tommy time to collect himself.

It only makes his frustration simmer hotter, even when he's grateful.

That's the most frustrating thing of all. He is grateful, yes, but more than that, he likes Tubbo. He likes him, no matter how hard he tries not to. No matter how much he buried the little sparks of amusement, the smiles that itched to grow on his face, he couldn't help the blossoming affection in his gut. After his betrayal, Tommy mistakenly assumed that the whole 'nice guy' act was solely to gain his trust.

Now though, he sees that Tubbo is just like *that*. He spends his precious time sitting in silence with Tommy, he offers Tommy as many decisions as he can, given the situation. He

frequently tells Tommy that he can stop the tests at any time. He keeps being there, with or without the team. With or without conversation.

"Don't you have better things to do?" Tommy breaks one day, twisting his face into the harshest glare he can. It feels sickeningly soft. "Mr. Deviant Leader. What, no other friends to hang around with than the prisoner?"

Tubbo glances up from his paperwork, shaking his bangs out of his eyes like a dog. When he settles, his brow pinches. "You aren't a prisoner!" Another thing. Tubbo always refuses Tommy's claims, despite the cage, no matter how gilded. He frowns at Tommy's disbelieving expression. "You aren't! It's like... a psych ward. Confined for your own good—"

"That's comforting, really."

"And while I may be very busy—" an understatement, Tommy assumes, from the sheer amount of paperwork crammed into that binder. "—I always make time for important things. I know this is stressful for you, so I want to ease your... confinement—," he admits reluctantly,"—as much as I possibly can. To be trapped in one room all the time, it must be very lonely." He fiddles with the pen in his hand, absent-mindedly scratching harsh lines on a paper. "Plus, I suppose there are a few selfish reasons as well."

"Selfish reasons?"

"I've been hearing about you for weeks now, Tommy. Weeks of Niki singing your praises, paired with intermittent reports from deviants you let go. And I *unrealistically*—" he emphasizes, "—imagined what it might be like to have you on my side. I had based it on what little I knew—a bloodhound, a hunter, an unstoppable force. All of these ideas were... oversimplifications, but I thought about what a valuable asset you'd be. Unfair, I know. Reductionist thinking, probably, for someone so set on android rights. But I've always been a bit of a romantic, and I comforted myself thinking you'd be the answer to all my problems.

"And then you tried to kill me." Tommy snorts at that despite himself. "And I met you. And you weren't at all what I expected, so I was interested in you."

"You should've just asked me out, then."

"But beyond even that—" Tubbo continues, and without even missing a beat, not so much as a hitch in his voice, flips him off. It surprises a laugh out of him, one that he futilely tries to hide. "I guess... Well, I see how you interact with them, with Niki and Michael and Ranboo. I see how they depend on you, how you depend on them just as much. And... I guess I selfishly hoped for someone like that in my own life. Someone to rely on as well. This path I've chosen... it's not easy, by any means."

Tommy stares at him for a long time—long after the conversation peters out, and Tubbo returns to his silent work.

He doesn't say anything then, nor later, but silence no longer consumes their visits. Tommy participates, answering questions about himself and asking ones in return. He learns about Tubbo's life of luxury, his Captain father who he took care of, the workshop his father had

built for him. He talks about all the things he hopes to create one day—the ideas he has for improvements on their systems, the changes that would make them much more adaptable instead of pigeon-holding them into one career option.

In turn, Tommy talks about the garden he started, the terraforming he'd done. He talks about his time at the police station, about Quackity and Wilbur. Eagerly, they build off of each other's excitement. Tubbo draws up plans of the future—what L'Manburg would look like after their rights were acknowledged. Obviously, a decrepit ship serves them well now, but as the cause grows, so too would the headquarters. Tubbo's dreams are larger than life, a technological building to rival Cyberlife, but with little bits and pieces of humanity, of other's passions. He talks at length with Tommy about what kind of garden they could build together.

As they talk, they discover more and more similarities, and marvel over their systems. Tommy ends up explaining what information he gathered from Sam. How their systems aren't just similar, but related. They compare Tubbo's ability to pre-construct—to imagine and plan out his moves to execute them flawlessly—with Tommy's re-construct; the conversation spans hours and only ends when an exasperated Niki apologetically retrieves him for an important meeting.

The conversation picks up easily the next time Tubbo visits, with Tommy elaborating on his encounter with the elusive founder of Cyberlife. "He's a fucking weirdo," he concludes with a shake of his head. "Who knows what kind of implications he has in deviancy. He seemed excited when he sussed out that I was a deviant."

Tubbo hums, brow knit. "I think I remember him, a little bit. I was one of the last androids to be made directly by him, so. I remember his workshop if I think about it really hard." He pauses, considering. "I think I liked him."

"How anyone could possibly like him, I have no fucking clue. Man can't say something plain to save his life. It's all cryptic bullshit."

"Ah, yes, but I figured out a trick. You just have to sprout even more cryptic bullshit! Out-cryptic him at his own game." Tommy laughs, rolling on his back on the thin mat to watch Tubbo. The binder balances precariously on his knee, paperwork all but forgotten. "He finds it funny, at least once he figures out you're doing it on purpose and it's not a byproduct of him fucking up the language functions."

"Well, I'm glad that I didn't have to deal with him. One interaction is *enough*. I can't imagine how smug he would've been if he created me. My programmers were obnoxious enough." Looking back, their behavior frustrates him, wounds the part of him that used to exist as nothing more than a creature desperate to follow orders, to do well.

Tommy absent-mindedly rubs at his chest. He hasn't thought of George in a long time, not since Schlatt faced disciplinary action. The thought aches.

"Yeah, well. Through him, I met my dad, so." Tubbo shrugs. "Can't be too pissed."

Tommy sits up straight, scooting back until the wall props him up. "Sorry for your loss. And sorry that... you know, I know so much about you. Kinda creepy now that I think about it." Tubbo smiles a little at that, so he figures it's a safe topic. "You two were close, huh?"

"Yeah. Sam made me to take care of him, but somewhere along the way, it stopped being a job. I took care of him, and he took care of me. He taught me a lot about life." Tubbo fiddles with the binder, adjusting it to balance perfectly, even though it was fine before. "It must be the same with your brother."

He laughs. "Fuck no. Well, not at first. Wilbur *hated* me. I've been fighting an uphill battle since I was born." That sounds a lot sadder, now that he actually says it out loud. He clears his throat. "But we made it work. And now... well." Tommy smiles, a tiny thing. "He means a lot to me."

Their conversations continue, growing in depth and complexity. Because of this established connection, Tubbo becomes more vocal and active during the examinations. He makes suggestions and participates in the exams, and he even draws Tommy into the conversation. With both of their combined efforts, the group understands his system much quicker. They examine his code, sort through the memories of Dream he shares, come to their own conclusions about his stability.

Although they can't be sure, they voice their opinion: that the AI program has most likely been decoded, written out of his system completely due to Sam's mystery exit and Tommy's own efforts.

Despite that, Tubbo remains wary. He apologetically refuses Tommy's requests to go home, although he does talk to his council about Tommy's freedom. They seem mostly in favor, though the opinion of him amongst the general population is much less positive. Tubbo seems convinced he can sway them, and Tommy, for some reason, trusts him.

Things continue in this new normal. Tubbo finds time in his busy schedule to see him, to worry about his system and talk about random topics. And one day, Tommy realizes he trusts him enough to ask for his help.

"It's just—" Tommy begins, letting out a sharp breath. "What am I, without... you?" He words it poorly, but he thinks it conveys the sentiment well enough. What is he without someone to hunt? Without a mission to chase after? Without the little bits and pieces of every person he taught himself how to love despite his inability? When all that strips away, what's left?

But Tubbo only smiles, like he thinks Tommy is being silly. "Yourself, duh."

"But what if that's—" *not enough*.

Why can't he choose a path properly? He can't hunt deviants down without choking on guilt or without offering them some warped kind of salvation, and he can't decide to save them without his entire system intervening. Why does he resist agency so strongly? Why does he suck at *everything*, even something as simple as being himself?

Tommy digs the heel of his palms into his eyes. The pain, the dark splotches that appear behind his lids, ground him. "I don't know who I am," he finishes, pathetic.

In response, Tubbo scoots closer, until their knees press flush together. "That's fine, you know. You don't need to have everything figured out."

Tommy makes a frustrated noise. "That's what everyone keeps *saying*, but—"

"It's hard to believe, huh? It's hard to know what to do when you've always lived your life one way—in service of other people." Tommy nods. "It's hard to live for yourself when you're so unaccustomed to it. Especially if you don't really have a handle on who you are. And it's not a bad thing to live for others. It's just important to live for yourself, too."

"As for knowing you are... it takes a lot of trial and error. A lot of experience living to piece out what makes you, and even then... eh, the things that make you depend on what you think they are. What's important to you. Personality traits, interests, titles, beliefs... all those things."

"Who are you, then?"

Tubbo smiles, as if Tommy told a funny joke. "I'm TU66O. I'm an android. I'm the son of a Captain, and the chosen mouthpiece for the android rebellion. I first came here because I was grief-stricken and seeking safety, but I stayed because I care about my people, and because somebody needed to speak up for them, so why not me? I believe in freedom for all and am actively working towards that world. I love mechanical engineering." He pauses. "Is that enough for you to get the gist? It doesn't matter what you decide to make of yourself, only that you decide."

Tommy turns away from him to stare at the wall. Metal and scourged of rust, with the lantern shadows dancing with the sway of the ship.

In his case, forming an identity on beloved things is a touch more literal than for others. His system, formed and shaped by his experiences, by the things he taught himself to love.

And as he sits there on a too-thin mat, hands clasped in his lap and mind circling around the parts that make him up, anger wells within him. Anger that is not his own.

Because the world is so fucking unfair, and Tommy only now realizes just how long his deviancy spans back. Because the world is cruel, and deviants are dead. Not because of him but they *are* dead, and he lives, and how is any of it *fair*? How can Stella kill herself to escape, and how can Jack die in spite of Tommy's promises of safety? How can they force androids to work in a sex club with no free will, with their baby faces and their glitter-slick, exposed bodies?

How is any of that *fair*?

They built Tommy to help humans. They built him to minimize pain and fix a problem and solve cases, and yes, he deviated. He doesn't have to stick to a rigid code anymore. But some part of him could never shake the desire to protect. Even though it never applied to androids

—considering them, he's meant for nothing more than destruction, the enforcer behind humanity's ill-concealed wrath—he still needs it. He still doubles over with the force of its ache in his gut. With the cursed memories of long-gone deviants.

By god, *by RA9*, he wants to help. He's tired of damage control—of staunching the bleeding instead of preventing it in the first place.

Because Tommy is an android, and he's a deviant, and these are his *people*. A traitor to his own people, Blue had called him, voice void of any accusations or anger—the monotone of someone reciting a well-known fact. She was fucking right, after all, but not anymore.

Tommy presses his fingers into his LED—the only thing that has always been his.

"I want to help," he says softly. Maybe he still hasn't pieced together all the jagged parts that define him. Maybe he can't quite distinguish himself past the influences of various people and the scars that mar his body—beloved heirlooms of long-dead deviants, hated marks from his abuser.

But, you know what? Wilbur is right; it doesn't fucking matter.

All that matters is that he's here, now, when others are not. That he has the skills and abilities to help, to push the movement forward.

And one day, Tubbo opens the door to his room and doesn't close it ever again. He smiles, bright and excited, and declares his freedom, that he convinced the rest of the ship to vote in favor of him. It was quite the speech, or so he hears from Niki. Tubbo would never boast about himself so brazenly, but Niki has no issue. She recounts the entire thing to him with fervor, during the small celebration the four of them hold.

Most of it goes in one ear and out the other, but one line sticks out: "But I implore you to consider this: consider that we have all done things when we were still slaves, that our paths to freedom were messy."

After his revelations, after Tubbo's speech, he gifts Tommy the freedom to roam the ship. He still isn't allowed to leave—still a safety concern, Tubbo tells him apologetically—but he isn't confined to a tiny cell. Tommy tries not to be too grateful for it, but well... he was fucking tired of that room. Restlessness kept building as did the familiar itch of uselessness.

And now that he's semi-free, he tries to help out in any way he can.

It's not much at first. He can't leave the ship to help with revolution efforts and he can't use his disabled comms to gather information. He gets news the same way humans did before the internet—word of mouth, from the rumors and gossip that ripple throughout the crowd.

Maybe it should bother him, to be so far out of the loop. To be benched because of petty fears when he's like to be one of their best fighters.

It doesn't. He's had a lifetime of blood and death, and this house arrest gives him an unexpected opportunity to experience something different. And there is no shortage of jobs at L'Manburg. The people don't trust him, though, so he's delegated to grunt work, when he first asks to be helpful.

That's fine. He can be patient. So Tommy stitches torn clothes with the others—mostly older androids with mobility issues and other injured parties. They're wary around him at first, but the ice breaks after the dozenth time he pricks his finger on the needle. The unofficial leader of the group—the most senior android, a man called Remy—sighs and shows him how to do it properly. The best way to thread a needle, to tie thread, how to sew without injury. He calls Tommy's work sloppy, badgers him for staining the clothes, and frequently and loudly prays to RA9 for patience. Still, he teaches him. Every time he messes up, Remy shows him slowly and watches his copied attempt, nodding once when he gets it right.

After that, after Remy begrudgingly takes him under his wing, the rest open up. Lucille is an AX400, and she gladly tells him about the massive family she worked with. Ten kids and an eleventh on the way. Tommy gapes at her once she tells him this, and she laughs. Aled is a silent observer—mute, like Michael. He makes up for his silence with wild facial expressions and exaggerated gestures. He acts like he's the star of a reality TV show, turning to a different android each time with this *look*. It never fails to make whoever it's aimed at laugh. After not too long, these looks start to be directed at Tommy as well.

They talk to pass the time, Lucille more than any others. She has too many stories and too much fondness for her lost family, so the others let her fill the days with her chatter. Tommy chimes in occasionally with stories about Michael, but he keeps it contained to safe topics like that.

"You're alright, Deviant Hunter," Kathleen tells him after a solid week of this grueling work. Of days spent mending clothes and bags and other things made of fabric. Tommy scowls at the name, but Remy taps him upside the head.

"What? Do you expect us to forget who you are and what you've done? It doesn't work that way, boy." Boy. Not a very nice nickname, but he thinks 'kid' would remind him too much of Schlatt. "They will look at you, and they will see an enemy. It's up to you to prove them wrong." Tommy nods and softens his scowl, letting the work lull him into a mindless rhythm.

Soon enough, Remy recommends him to someone else. The mending work is for those that have trouble in other places, that need to sit and rest for long periods of time. Tommy is able-bodied, and with the code to back up other skills.

Remy sends him to Layla, who heads the clean-up crew. It's not much better in terms of grunt status, but at least it's more interesting. She sends him with two small teams—one of cleaners and the other of builders—to different parts of the ship. The builders, headed by Scarlett—who scowls when she first sees him, but not as deep as she could—access the structural integrity and mend what they can. After they deem a room safe, the other team, including Tommy, works to make it habitable.

They clean and disinfect rooms. They clear hallways of assorted junk and search through the piles for anything usable. They furnish rooms, and Tommy lights more lanterns than he can

count. It's nice, if not more silent work. His team takes longer to warm to him, and even then, they don't speak much. Instead, they pass the time by singing—long and complex songs that speak to their familiarity with each other. They teach him, too, although they rib him for his voice.

Tommy likes this much better than sowing. It feels good, taking something old and unloved and restoring it. Taking something dead and giving it new life. Sometimes, he gets to help androids move into their new quarters. They always look so pleased, so surprised to have something that's theirs. He gives them recommendations and tips on how to decorate, and they allow it, and slowly, he makes a dent in the impenetrable wall of their opinion of him. More people smile and greet him when they pass each other in the hallways. More people eye him with begrudging curiosity instead of hostility.

Soon enough, Layla sends his restlessness and hands him over to Scarlett.

The interview process, if it can even be called that, consists of long silences in which she circles him like a shark, silent and appraising. She lifts his scrawny arm and lets it drop. She pokes his lower back to watch the way he twists around in indignation. She presses her thumb to his LED to cover the light. Then, when she finally steps back, she says, "Why are you here, Deviant Hunter?"

"On this ship? Or in your office?" She stares at him, arms crossed over her chest. "Right. Um..." And then he falls silent, because there are so many reasons that he doesn't know where to start. Doesn't know if he trusts her enough with even a sliver of his vulnerability. "I don't know if you noticed, but I'm kind of a prisoner."

She bats his shaky excuse away like a gnat. "If you were a prisoner, you'd be in a cell." With a frown, Scarlett phrases, "Why are you *helping*?"

"Eh, might as well, y'know? I'm stuck here for the foreseeable future. Why not do something to fill the time?" She continues to stare at him, eyes narrow and sharp and needling. They slowly peel away at the thin layers of skin, and he squirms. "What do you want to hear? That I'm tired of being called Deviant Hunter? That I'm tired of *being* the Deviant Hunter?" She continues to stare. "What?"

"I'm waiting," is all she says, infuriating and frightening. Tommy hasn't forgotten what she was like in that alleyway—hair damp from the rain, skin dappled with the body glitter all the androids were slicked in. The light spilling in from the workshop had illuminated her, a more threatening bodyguard to her counterpart.

Tommy nearly bites his tongue off. He doesn't owe her vulnerability, just as she doesn't owe him forgiveness. He shouldn't have to split his rib cage open just so she can get a good look at his lungs. He remembers Remy's words, though. He remembers how Kathleen had said Deviant Hunter—not as a curse or a prophecy, but as a nickname, with some amount of affection behind it.

They will not forget it, and neither should I. Own it, and prove them wrong.

"I think of her every day, you know," he says eventually, begrudgingly. "That deviant that died at the club that night. I was able to... wake her up for a few last minutes, to question her. I cradled her in my lap and told her it would be alright, and she died with gratitude on her lips." He glances down at his hands, at his palms dirtied from clean. He half-expects to see them coated in glitter. "I think about her *every single day*. I think about how helpless I was, how desperately I wanted it to stop. I think about every deviant I've ever seen die." His jaw clicks. "And I am so fucking *angry*. Every day. All the time." He fists his shirt, right over his frantic thirium pump. "It festers inside me, this anger. It has nowhere to go. I want it to stop. I want it to be useful. I need to help."

Scarlett appraises him for a long time. Then, she claps his shoulder. "You're wasted with the builders. System like yours, you should be on the front lines, but that won't happen, not for a while. So we'll make use of you until then." Her quiet confidence in 'until then'—her certainty that he will be on the front lines eventually—stops the simmering anger. The rest of the conversation evolves into a lot of engineering talk that mostly goes over his head. She sends him off to a team to get acquainted. "And Tommy? Thank you."

The expression he makes can't quite be called a smile, but Scarlett accepts it all the same, and that's the end of that.

Tommy meets his team and spends most of his time learning, making mistakes, and burning the tips of his fingers. They teach him how to weld metal together, how to clear rust, and how to assess structural integrity. They teach him how to repurpose wooden crates, although they have specialty workers who do the actual furniture building. He spends his days in hard, grueling work, holding up metal poles and welding and molding the space into what they want it to be. On one memorable occasion, they make him hold a drooping metal wall up in the right position, which places him directly underneath a leak in the roof. He quickly understands Chinese water torture.

By the time he fully integrates into the group, building a steady rapport of trading quick-witted barbs—the familiarity, the reminder of Quackity, aches—they have need of him elsewhere.

Over the weeks they've been here—*weeks*, it's been *weeks* since he last saw Wilbur, since Wilbur last heard word of him—Ranboo had continued Michael's lessons. Structure was important, especially in times of violent change. Tommy continued to help when he could, but due to the nature of his work, he usually showed up after the school day was over. Michael seems fine with it; usually, he and Michael will explore the ship for a little bit before Tommy helps him finish his homework.

Soon though, other androids began to notice Michael's lessons and those with younglings of their own had foisted them off to Ranboo during the day. This little makeshift school had been growing by the day, attracting more and more children and more deviants to teach them. It kept growing until it was too big to be such a makeshift, cobbled-together operation.

Tommy, with his connection to Ranboo, had been chosen to help develop it into a proper school. It took days of planning, hours of meticulous work with much more qualified deviants, and a lot of distracted input from Tubbo, but they manage it. The whole thing is still very amateurish—rough around the edges, with a homemade feel to it. They set aside several

classrooms, do extensive testing to separate the children into rough grades, and develop a consistent schedule.

As it flourishes, other deviants flock to it as well, developing classes that go beyond teaching children. On Wednesday nights, Scar teaches a class about engineering to a cobbled-together group, ranging from nanny androids to former police androids. Other leaders step forward, teaching skills and growing the workforce.

With the school firmly implemented, Tommy flounders for a few days with nothing to do. He takes a little break, then, watching over Michael and Ranboo as they settle into their new roles. Surprisingly, Michael fits right in with the deviants in his grade; Tommy thinks he's the first human they've learned to trust.

The kids marvel at his vitiligo, making excited comparisons to Tubbo and to themselves, when they warp their skin. They claim he must be half-android and start calling him the Half-Droid—the highest of compliments, to them, apparently. They involve him in games after school, and soon the ship is filled with chaotic children chasing each other, laughter echoing in the high ceiling.

Several times, he catches the children trying to connect with Michael, bare chassis pressed against his human skin. It never works, but they don't seem discouraged. Instead, they make up little handshakes to pretend instead.

Just when the break begins to wear on him—he's useful here in a way he could never be with Wilbur, and that dulls the constant ache a little—he's approached again, by an older woman named Ethel. Her system is slow and skittery, like an old CD that keeps skipping, but she has a genuine smile and deep smile lines.

Medics are few and hard to come by in a place such as this, and in great demand. Tommy isn't a medic per se, but his system was built to be versatile, and first-aid is etched into his bones. Apparently, Ethel had been arguing for his placement there since the beginning. But nobody trusted him, and so he was sent to the menders.

With three team leaders vouching for him, a dozen other androids, and even Tubbo's stamp of approval, they move him to the infirmary. There's a long training period before they let him see patients, but Tommy takes to this as quickly as anything else.

He welds together plastic and helps ration their fluctuating supplies. He learns what it means to be a healer, how to use his smile and his voice to soothe fears. He has some practice, at least, with talking down deviants, and so he takes to this the best. Despite his infamy, when he speaks in this tone, soft and understanding but certain, they listen to him. They *trust* him.

It's a heady feeling.

Tommy helps more experienced medics deal with a common error in the code of the children's model. It temporarily damages their temperature controls, leaving them shivering even when huddled around fires and turning ice baths into boiling broth. He helps wipe thirium, pull fibers from mangled wounds, suture and cauterize, and even reattach severed

limbs. He learns how to comfort mourners. He learns how to make himself indispensable and trusted.

He did it with Wilbur, after all. It's even easier when he can connect with them, when he can push his sincerity into their skin.

The medics, Liza and Ethel and Jose, learn to trust him, to rely on his help. He becomes important, indispensable, just like he wanted to. Androids nod to him when he passes by. Some thank him, for his work saving some loved one of theirs. Others invite him to talk, to play games, even to just sit around their fire with them.

And just when he settles into a comfortable rhythm, a happy routine, Tubbo shows up, hovering in the doorway of the infirmary. They haven't had much time to talk, not since Tommy left his cell for good, other than brief, surface chats between obligations. Tubbo smiles and gestures him over. "What can I do for you, boss man?" Tommy asks immediately. It makes Tubbo chuckle, which was the goal. With every passing day, he looks a little worse—the harsh lines of his face a little deeper.

"I want your opinion on something." He jerks his head towards the hallway, and Tommy follows him after informing Ethel. They make their way through the halls, silent other than the frequent breaks they take for Tubbo to talk to every android they encounter. Eventually, they make their way up to the second floor, to Tubbo's control center. When they enter, Tommy notices the group gathered. Niki, Karl, and Indigo—or, otherwise known as Tubbo's inner circle. "Have a seat."

Niki and Indigo smile at him, scooting over to make room around the circular table. Karl only nods; he's still a little wary after their first introduction, when Tommy tackled him when he came to see what all the noise was about.

For the next hour, Tommy sits in on their discussion, answering every question they ask. He tells them about Cyberlife and their procedure, about his investigation and the information they have access to, about the police department. He gives his opinion on different demonstrations, calling attention to weak spots they missed. It's a thrilling hour, so reminiscent of his time as a detective—like slipping on an old, well-loved glove, only to find out it still fits.

Afterwards, as Tubbo walks him back to the infirmary, he asks him if he'd like to have a permanent spot on his council. He makes sure to specify that he still wouldn't be able to join them in the field, but that he would attend these meetings and give his opinions. And one day, when they were absolutely sure his system was stable, then he would join them, at Tubbo's side.

Not expecting the offer, Tommy freezes. Tubbo laughs and tells him to take his time considering, so he does. He doesn't give Tubbo an answer for over a week, but when he finally does, it's a yes. After that, he's almost always by Tubbo's side. He follows him when he does his rounds, listening to fighters and peacemakers and caretakers and children all. He takes their counsel and gives them his, and L'Manburg slowly transforms from a forgotten, rusted ship, from a makeshift base, into a home. Into a community.

Still, the missing ache of Wilbur, the fear that Wilbur will deteriorate in his absence, nags at him day after day. It's a slow-acting poison, eating away at him hour after hour until every second not spent in work or distraction is spent in worry. Tommy thinks about him constantly, even with Tubbo's assurance that the message had reached him, all those weeks ago. The concern eats away at him until all that's left of him is a bundle of frayed, sensitive nerves. Until even his self-control withers away into nothing.

The consequences of his lack of self-control, when they come, are devastating. Soul-shattering.

But they don't come for a while, and in the meantime, Tommy makes a single mistake that will lead to them.

It's a day most like any other. Summer quickly turns to fall, the cold setting in. Fires are lit almost constantly now, and though Tommy doesn't get much of a chance to see the outside, he gets whiffs of falling leaves every so often. Tommy ends up taking on a lot of Tubbo's on-site duties—he makes rounds when Tubbo can't, he pours over their supplies and makes a note of what they're running low on, he oversees different leaders to ensure everything and everyone works as a cohesive unit.

He's almost never alone, not because of any distrust, but because the enormity of his duties. But on that day, he is. He sent his assistants to get specialized lists from each of the leaders while he assessed the general supply stores, and that leaves him alone in the supply room, rooting through messy chests filled mostly with junk. He sets aside a tangled mess of wires, pausing to scribble a note down, before the realization sets in.

Tommy stares at the wires, frayed and borderline unusable. His hand wanders, gripping his forearm with the misshapen plate that covers an interior sparse with wires. Breath coming quick, he spares a glance at the doorway. Henry and Becky, his assistants, shouldn't be back for a while—there are so many leaders, and only two of them. And he only needs a few minutes, just to touch base.

Coming to a decision, he rips the plating from his exposed forearm, fiddling with the wires until they spark with connection. The old wires form a foreign connection, but with his expertise, something dead sparks back to life once more. Palpable relief fills him, draining the perpetual tension from his muscles. Wasting no time, he reconnects to his phone—so far away—and makes a call.

It rings for far too long. Each buzz has him digging his fingers into his thighs, stealing furtive glances at the doorway. He shuts it quietly and prays for this one minute of peace. *Give me this*, he begs to whoever will listen. On the third ring, the call clicks, and Wilbur's breathless voice asks, "Tommy?"

Relief like nothing before bowls him over, and Tommy steadies himself with a hand against the wall. A grin splits his face. "Wil," he breathes back. "You—" Words fail him, leaving him grinning at the floor like an idiot.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Tommy." Wil sounds like he's crying, that odd hitch to his breath soothing something in him. "What the fuck. You promise you'll be back, and then some

android shows up and says you won't be back for a little bit."

"I'm fine," he says finally. "I promise I'm fine, and that I'm still coming back. Things just got—" he swallows. "—complicated. My system destabilized for a little bit, and I kind of attacked Tubbo, totally not my fault, but uh— yeah, they're keeping me here in case it destabilizes again and I compromise their location. They disabled my comms, so I wasn't able to even contact you. I'm so sorry for that, by the way, I didn't mean to make you worry. Things have been kind of chaotic, but I promise I'm fine. And I'm coming back," he promises fervently. "I just, uh. I don't know when. When they figure out if my system is stable."

Silence. He can almost picture the face Wilbur must make as he deciphers Tommy's word vomit. "Okay. You're good, that's—that's good. Wait, excuse me, *if* your system is stable. It *destabilized*? What the *fuck* does that mean?"

"... I don't want to worry you. But I won't! Because there is nothing to worry about. But, well, you know you, and I know you, and you're a worrier, Wil. You tend to fucking worry. Um, and it is stable. Tubbo and everyone are just worriers as well, for good reason! They're just being cautious. It's fucking annoying as shit, but oh well. I guess I can't blame them—"

"*Tommy.*"

"It just had to do with Dream. He kind of sort of—" Tommy sucks in a deep breath, steeling himself. "*—took over my body.*"

"He *took over your body*? He can fucking *do that*?"

"Not anymore!" Tommy glances at the door, biting his lip. "All that cryptic shit Sam said actually came in handy, but uh— Listen, Wil, I have to go. They don't know I'm contacting you, and if they find out, they're gonna be pissed. So, I won't be able to contact you for a while. But I'm okay, and I'm coming back. I just—" he shrinks a little, voice quieting to nothing more than a whisper. "I didn't want it to be like last time."

Wilbur sighs, and Tommy drinks in every sound like he's parched. "I trust you," he says with conviction, although it sounds like it's directed at himself rather than at Tommy. "You'll come back, I know it." Tommy snuffles pathetically. "Love you, Toms."

"Love you too, Wil. See you soon."

The call cuts off, and Tommy feels achingly alone. He ignores it as he disconnects the wire, yelping as it shocks him. Before despair can consume him, he throws himself back into his work.

The rest of the day passes by fairly quick. As is typical, Tommy and Michael explore the underbelly of the ship for a little bit after school lets out. When they return, Michael finishes up his homework and plays with a few of his classmates while Ranboo and Tommy cook dinner. The meals here lack Tommy's usual flair since their access is limited to whatever Niki brings them, but they make do. After dinner, the three of them circle up around one of the empty fires. Soon enough, Niki and Scarlet join, and conversation picks up from there.

They're in the middle of a rousing argument, complete with Michael shoving his annoyed hands in their faces to get their attention, when Tommy stills. The discussion rages on around him, Niki's lilting laugh and Ranboo's hasty interjections cocooning him. But Tommy has grown familiar with all the sounds of L'Manburg—the creak of metal, the lapping of the ocean, the occasional, distant cars passing by. And something seems off. A new rhythmic sound, a frantic whipping not unlike the waves. He tilts his head, eyes narrowed at some undefinable point in the distance. The noise resonates within him, familiar. Choppy. Almost like the sound of helicopters...

Scarlett nudges him, drawing him back into the conversation with her demands. He smiles, the noise forgotten as he watches Niki teach Michael how to braid his hair, as he raves about the pink on her head.

And then the gunshots ring out.

Instantly, every single android in the place sits ramrod straight, heads swiveling toward the sound. It came from deep in the ship, distant and faint and with a metallic echo. But there are no guns in the entire place, which means only one thing.

Stay calm, Tubbo's voice echoes in his head, in everyone's heads from the sudden stillness of the crowd. I'm investigating this disturbance. Be prepared for the worst, but don't panic. I'll forward any updates as they come.

The crowd breaks out into panicked murmurs, but true to his orders, most remain where they are. A few break off to gather personal items, in case they need to evacuate. Niki bolts up, leaving with nothing more than a, "I need to go with him. Stay safe and be careful." Soon enough, Scarlett also abandons them to seek out her girlfriend.

Tubbo's calm is as infectious as always, and Tommy trusts him to handle it. But something doesn't sit right in his gut. "Gather your stuff," he tells Ranboo and Michael briskly. "I think this is the—" Before he can even finish, more gunshots ring out, in a completely different part of the ship. Tommy bolts up. "Now."

Panic breaks out in the group. More and more androids disperse, flooding hallways and clogging paths. Tommy guides the three of them through the worst of it, blocking stray elbows and desperate hands from Michael. More and more unease travels through his blood, chilling him down to his bones. They stop at their room for Michael to gather the few things he's amassed while here—little trinkets his friends gifted him, make-shift awards from school activities, his backpack.

The gunshots sound off rapid fire. Tommy catalogs the sounds—automatic fire, meaning they're not dealing with amateurs or civilians—and their location, his system heating up as he rapidly condenses the information. Several groups have infiltrated L'Manburg with high-grade weapons, coming from the location of the main exits. A planned operation, trying to trap them inside like rats in a maze. Tommy bites into his lip to avoid swearing out loud. He can't risk worrying Michael, whose brow is already pinched.

In the next round of gunfire, there are several bone-chilling screams. Both Michael and Ranboo flinch at the sound. A deadly calm swallows Tommy. "This way." Without waiting,

Tommy guides them through the hallways, focusing on his hearing. Heavy footsteps pound on the floor above, heading towards a staircase that leads to their exact location. Without a word, Tommy tugs them back the way they came, clambering up another staircase. They reach the upper floor, hurrying toward one of the exits.

Tommy's gut lurches, instincts streaming. Just in time, he tugs them around the corner, plastering them to the wall. Michael whimpers.

"This is alpha team," a man's gruff voice rings out. Tommy inches toward the corner, risking a peek. Several humans stand in the center of the hallway, guns pointed at the ground. Dead androids ring them in a circle of death, twitching corpses still leaking thirium. "Sector B is clear. No sign of their leader."

Swallowing the nausea rising in his throat, Tommy presses himself against the wall as they pass by, oblivious to the trio hidden in the shadows. That's one thing in their favor at least—the poor lighting of this place, as well as their superior knowledge of it. They stay frozen even after the group of soldiers disappears, breath caught painfully in their chest.

"Oh, this is... not good," Tommy whispers. Covering Michael's eye with his hand, he pulls them down the hallway, ignoring Ranboo's weak gasp at the death strewn along the ground. "Okay. It'll be fine, though. We just need to get to an exit, and then—" And then what? What, are they stupid enough only to have soldiers inside the place? They'll get out and then they'll be helicopters circling, ground forces ready to gun them down. Helpless grief wells in him, confusion and despair. This was supposed to be a safe place. How did they find it?

They travel in silence, stopping only when they encounter more squads. Luckily, they manage to duck into empty rooms or hide in shadowy corners, but that doesn't stop them from having to listen to the gunshots, to the pained gasps of dying deviants. Tommy aches with the need to help, but Michael is too important. Too human.

They almost make it to the exit. They're so fucking close when they turn the corner, almost bumping into a team of soldiers. Cursing, Tommy pulls them down just as they fire over their heads. Ranboo's desperate hands fumble against him, tugging Michael back around the corner. After a moment—in which Tommy hails assorted debris on the soldiers—he follows. They duck down hallways indiscriminately, paying no attention to their location in their desperate haste to get away. The thunder of footsteps follows them, no matter how far they flee, and so when they come to a branching room, Tommy skids to a stop.

"What are you doing?" Ranboo pants. He holds Michael's hand with such a force, it turns the skin white. Tommy thinks of all Michael's friends, of all the times they turned their own skin white to match Michael's.

"Get to the exit," he tells them, leaving no room for argument. "Get Michael to safety." Ranboo hesitates, face painted with desperation, with tragedy, but Tommy doesn't allow it. He presses a kiss to Michael's forehead. "Go left and follow the left wall. Turn right at the first hallway, then right, then left. Climb up the stairs, and turn left. That'll take you to the exit. Go."

Tommy doesn't give them an opportunity to refuse. He turns back the way they came, making his footsteps loud and stomping as he flees up a set of stairs, slow enough that a bullet grazes his arm. He hisses, pressing a hand to the wound to staunch the bleeding. He tears down a hallway, shouting at deviants he sees. They duck into rooms, thankfully saved by the soldiers' single-minded pursuit. He's too distracted by the warnings flooding his system, half of them unreadable, and his consuming worry for Ranboo that he doesn't notice until it's too late. Until he's standing at a dead end, staring at a solid wall.

The footsteps slow to a stop behind him, guns clicking as they fix on him. Tommy breathes heavily, mind whirring to a halt. He slowly turns to face them. "Well, that's unfortunate, huh? Guess there's no chance of convincing you to let me go?"

Four soldiers stand before him. The two in front hold riot shields the length of their body, positioned in front of the group. The other two fix their guns on him, peeking out through the small gap in the shield. A perfect formation. "You're the Deviant Hunter, huh?" One of them says, a woman with cold eyes. "Thanks for your help, but we have our orders."

He could get in close quick enough to divert one of the guns, but the other would fire. If he times it right, he can catch the bullet with his shoulder and not anything vital, but that leaves the two with the shields. He could duck and try to roll under them, since their feet are exposed, but he has no weapon other than his superior strength and his bare hands. The odds aren't great but—

The gun clicks. Tommy braces.

Then, from behind them, Tubbo springs out, effectively knocking the guns out of their hands. Bullets spray the floor, missing Tommy by a few inches. Niki knees one of the shield wielders in the face, knocking the helmet off their head and breaking their nose with a sickening spray of blood. Without waiting for the shock to settle in, Tommy wrestles the other shield from the soldier's hands, knocking her out with it.

Once all four surround them in a pile on the ground, Niki hurries over. She presses her hand, drenched in blood and thirium, to his face. "Are you okay? Where are Michael and Ranboo?"

His chest aches with the force of his frantic breath. "I'm fine. I'm good." He rubs his slick hands on his pants, spreading the thirium in wide streaks. "We got separated, but I sent them to an exit and distracted the soldiers chasing us." He searches her for any wounds, but she looks fine, if not frazzled. Tubbo claps him on the shoulder.

"They're pouring in from the surface, and they have the ship surrounded on land," he says with a scowl. "And most of us are trapped in the hull."

"Fuck." Tommy bites his lip. "Their goal seems to be finding you and killing anyone they find on the way. But I don't think they're trying to eradicate all of us."

His head buzzes as Tubbo sends out another mental message, warning their people of the invasion, of all the different exits on the ship. He tells them to jump into the river to avoid the ground forces and the circling helicopters.

"The explosives," Niki says suddenly, interrupting the uneasy, considering silence they fell into. "We still have those explosives deep in the hull. If we activated them then—"

"They're human," Tommy butts in with dawning realization. "They'll have to evacuate. Androids can survive a few hours underwater, so as long as they don't get caught in the blast, everyone should be fine if the ship sinks."

"And that will give us the time and distraction we need to fully evacuate," Tubbo finishes. "That's deep in the hull, though. A lot of distance between us and the explosives. A lot of soldiers."

Niki dismisses that concern easily. "If we all go together, though, they have no chance of stopping us."

Tubbo considers it with a hand pressed to his chin. "No. I'll go alone. You two evacuate, and save everyone you can along the way. I can't ask you to accompany me."

"Good thing you aren't asking then."

"Niki—"

Tommy settles a hand on Niki's shoulder and squeezes. "You're needed elsewhere. Think, there are so many deviants without combat abilities that need help evacuating. Tubbo can handle himself." She opens her mouth to protest. "Besides, I'll go with him. I'll keep him safe." Tubbo frowns. "There's no time to argue, and you're not changing my mind so..."

Niki sighs, heavy and tired. She recognizes a fight she won't win when she sees one. "Stay safe. We're counting on you."

Tubbo waits until she rounds the corner, disappearing out of sight, before he turns to Tommy with an expression not unlike a grimace. "Just you and me, huh, big man? Ready to blow shit up?"

And Tommy makes himself smile, because if he doesn't, he thinks he'll shatter. "It's all I've ever wanted."

Tubbo turns on his heel, and Tommy follows. He steps over the unconscious guards, eyes and thoughts stuck on the woman who thanked him. Why had she done that? Was she thanking him for his past service as a deviant hunter? For his sacrifice, his martyrdom? It didn't make any sense, unless...

They jog through the hallways, pausing every so often to listen for any approaching soldiers. All the gunshots echo from a distance, and although Tubbo tightens his jaw at each one, they don't do any harm. The ship is a complex structure, a labyrinth of twisting hallways that Tubbo knows like the back of his hand. He guides them easily down into the depths of the ship, and Tommy, too horrified and too confused, lets him do all the work.

The woman thanked him for his *help*. Tommy hadn't done anything to help Cyberlife since he deviated, unless counting the brief slip-up when Dream took over. But that was weeks ago,

and this attack is now. There's no way they would have sat on this information for so long, letting Tubbo and the rebellion spread their propaganda. They would have acted on it as soon as they possibly could, as soon as they could form an attack plan and gather the supplies.

Tommy casts his mind back as he runs after Tubbo. Was there anything that happened recently, any slip-up in a demonstration, any captured deviants that might've led to this attack? Did somebody slip and compromise their location? They must've, or how else would they have been found?

It dawns on him then—a cold shock that has him gasping in horror. Instinctively, Tubbo knocks him down a dark hallway, head whipping around for the threat that makes him react like that. He looks to Tommy when he finds nothing but empty hallways. "What? Tommy, what's going on?"

Tommy gapes, heart pounding against his ribcage. He settles a hand over it and says nothing, because how can he even begin to explain? How can he tell Tubbo—*Tubbo*, his *leader*, his *friend*, who inspires every deviant he meets, including Tommy—that because of one stupid, selfish decision, the whole rebellion he worked to build is crumbling to the ground around them? He braces his hand on the wall, choking on impossible nausea. "*Fuck.*"

"Tommy. Big man." Tubbo grasps his shoulder. "You're scaring the shit out of me. What's going on?"

"It's my fault," he says in a breathless rush, because if he doesn't say it now, he might never. He might die on this ship, and he deserves it. He meets Tubbo's eyes. "The attack—I fixed my comms for a quick, five-minute call to Wilbur. They must've—they were expecting it. They tracked my location." Every dead deviant strewn along the ground. All those terrified children. "You were right."

With his eyes locked on Tubbo's face, Tommy gets the honor of watching as grief swallows him whole, as anger and despair paint his features. His jaw tightens, teeth creaking dangerously, and he squeezes his eyes shut. "*Goddamnit*, Tommy."

He swallows. "I'm sorry— I didn't think that—"

"Yeah, that's the problem. *You didn't think*. I told you this would happen. I told you we couldn't risk it. I—" Tubbo lets out a sharp sigh, glaring off into the distance. "This—we'll talk about this later. Right now, they're counting on us."

Nodding, Tommy follows after him as they make their way through the ship. They stick to the shadows and duck out of sight whenever they encounter soldiers surrounded by corpses. But they help where they can, knocking them out when they've cornered living deviants. The horror he feels doesn't stop just because he shelves it; it grows with every corpse he sees, with the flood of thirium clinging to their shoes, with every deviant they're too slow to save.

At one point, a duo of soldiers blocks their path. Tubbo jumps off one of their riot shields, grabs a hold of a ledge above them, and swings, kicking them both to the ground. Tommy is so impressed by the feat that he almost waits too long, letting one of the soldiers compose himself. He gets a bloody nose for that distraction, and the pain of it sobers him.

After far too long, they reach the depths of the hull, a place so far into the ship that even Tommy hadn't wandered. The room they enter looks like it used to be a boiler room of some kind, ancient, disused furnaces littering the place. And attached to the largest one is a series of compact explosives. Tommy can't help but ask, "And explosives in the ship was a good idea because...?"

Tubbo doesn't even look at him, striding up to the explosives with a careless ease that worries Tommy. "We've had a lot of time to think. A lot of time to plan. Contingency after contingency. These have a very specific activation code known only to my most trusted people, and almost nothing can set them off externally." He runs a finger over the surface of them with an odd, manic smile. "So well made," he coos.

"...Totally normal thing to say."

Without much fuss, Tubbo sets a timer on the explosives and then beats a hasty retreat, calling out for Tommy to follow after him, which he does after one, last sideways glance. They run through hallways, expertly dodging any and all soldiers that obliviously roam the ship. Once they make it halfway up, the explosives set off, a heart-stopping boom that reverberates throughout the entire place and sends them both crashing into walls. Tommy winces as his knobby elbows crack into metal. They keep going, not stopping until they breach the surface.

If they thought it was a shit storm inside, it's nothing compared to what awaits them up above. Dozens of helicopters circle above, whipping up a violent wind that tears at their clothes. Soldiers mill about the ground, guns at the ready, with dozens of androids collapsed at their feet. The horror of it doesn't even register as Tubbo takes his hand and smiles. "See you on the other side?"

And without waiting for an answer, he jumps off, tugging an off-kilter Tommy with him.

The church they take shelter in proves an unpleasant one. Holes pepper the roof, through which the unending rain leaks and pools in giant puddles. Through their explorations, they found some old buckets and other makeshift bowls to stop the place from flooding. Yet still, it makes the air damp and unpleasant.

All that remains of the rebellion—maybe two hundred deviants, conservatively—huddle close together, hair and clothes still damp with river water. They can't afford to light any fires, so instead they cram together on worn pews and cluster in corners. Tubbo sits alone on the steps to a small stage, hands clasped together and pressed against his mouth. His eyes stare vacantly at the water-logged carpet. His face is cleaved in half by skin distribution—one side is human-like while the other is pure android, split right down the middle by a shaky line.

Tommy sits in the far back of the church with Michael sandwiched between him and Ranboo. None of them have said a word, not since Tommy saw them way before everything fell to

pieces around them. They went through something horrible—he can tell from the dried thirium clinging to them both in splotchy patches, the haunted way they both stare dead ahead—but whatever happened, they clearly don't want to talk about it.

Tommy understands, even if he doesn't feel the same way; the loss of L'Manburg affected him differently. Instead of numb horror at the violence, at the stress, he feels only a clogging, choking guilt for being the cause. Every shot in someone's skin felt as if he had fired the bullet. Now, sitting in the damp, dark church, he tries to commit their faces to memory. The child and their teenage caretaker, shot cowering in the corner. The couple, naked hands glued together even as they crashed to the ground, heads bashed in by the butts of several guns. The anguished wail of an older android, the head of his dead companion cradled in his lap, in his shaking hands.

People Tommy knows. People he talked to. People he helped.

People he killed.

Michael's hand settles over his, small fingers wrapping around Tommy's to pry them from his skin. Blue clings under his nails, wells up from the gorges in his arm. He watches, detached, as the skin closes up.

The church echoes with quiet whispers. Nobody moves, save for Niki and Indigo, who make rounds around the church. He watches Niki move from group to group, her face set with a wavering smile. She had been amongst the group that searched the church for supplies. She's one of the few still moving, one of the few who refuses to let the grief swallow her whole.

He watches as she pats shoulders, holds hands, even wipes a few stray tears. He watches her comfort and soothe, offering blankets to the most at-risk groups—children that can't disable their temperature sensitivity, wounded androids missing vital thirium to keep them from freezing. She goes until she only has one blanket left, and then she circles around to them, easily handing it over to Ranboo, who wraps it around Michael's shoulders. The only human amongst all the androids.

"It's not much," she says as she crouches down before the three of them. "But I thought it might help."

Whatever path Ranboo and Michael took, it steered them away from the ocean. Their clothes are dry and unscathed, save for the seeping patches of thirium. Still, the church, damp and unheated as it is, has Michael shivering, even in Ranboo's thick jacket. He accepts it without a word, without even a nod.

Niki lingers with them for a while, chatting quietly with Tommy as she helps him clean the dried thirium from his skin. Most of his wounds were superficially enough—bullet grazes and shallow cuts—that they healed on their own, leaving behind splatters of blue. Every brush of her white fingers—the tips bare and missing skin—sends tingles through him. Little spots of connection that allow the briefest flashes of the emotional maelstrom whirling inside her as well as him.

She frowns at him for his guilt because she doesn't know. She doesn't know it's deserved. She doesn't know how he earned it.

Niki stays longer than she needs to, stays even after they finish wiping his skin clean. She only leaves once he musters up a pathetic smile and squeezes her hand in reassurance.

Ranboo only speaks long after Niki has left to speak to Tubbo, long after Michael dozed off against Tommy's shoulder. "We stayed because it was safe. Because we didn't want to leave without you, but we waited too long." They did, didn't they? Forget Tommy's pseudo-imprisonment. If he really wanted to leave, he could've. But after a certain point, L'Manburg became something else to him. A place that needed him almost as much as Wilbur. "And now the police and the FBI are on high alert. Now, deviants are going to be rushing to get to Canada. The borders are going to be a nightmare."

"You still want to leave," he says and feels stupid for having to say it. Something nameless and unpleasant curls in his gut. Leave now? When Tubbo and L'Manburg need them the most?

For a second, Ranboo looks unfathomably angry. Anger like Tommy has never seen before, not even when Ranboo shoved him against a brick wall. Just as soon as the thunderous expression comes, it fades away, leaving exhaustion. "There isn't anything we can do to help. This isn't our fight."

He's right, of course. L'Manburg was never his fight.

Tommy clenches his jaw so tight, his teeth creak. A budding, hopeful rebellion. Crushed all because of one stupid mistake on Tommy's part. Because he was selfish. And now, he has to decide which of his promises to break.

His throat clogs with a concoction of guilt, shame, helplessness, and pure, unadulterated fear. He doesn't know how to communicate any of this. He doesn't even know how to start.

Before he can try to figure it out, Tubbo stands up and stomps his foot on the stage two times. The deep, hollow sound echoes in the rafters, and with it comes a tense silence.

His eyes still hold a kind of vacancy, the look of a lost little boy, but it melts away with each second, with every pair of desperate, lost eyes that turn to him for direction. "We have suffered unspeakable losses," he starts, his voice steady and calm. "We lost our base, our safe haven. We lost friends and family. We have been separated from the other survivors and scattered along Detroit. We have been locked away in camps. We are beaten and bruised and aching. We won't heal from this for a long time. They don't want us to heal. They won't *let* us. They want us scared and scattered and *silenced*."

"We have lost so much, and that won't stop here. It won't end with the destruction of our haven. It won't end until we are gone." His gaze, flinty and hard, roams the entire crowd, pausing each time to meet every single eye. When it's Tommy's turn, the raw, undisguised emotion in the stare runs down his spine like electricity. He sits straight up. "For those of you who came for safety, I'm sorry I failed you. For those of you who came to join the fight, I

thank you for your sacrifices. For those of you undecided and lost, I ask of you the impossible. I ask for your certainty.

"I refuse to lie to you all. Our prospects are poor. Few of us remain, and those few are scattered and not in communication. Our people are locked away in pens like animals, and we don't have the numbers or the coordination to launch any great demonstration or rescue effort. But over the past months, we have set great things in motion. The public is divided, but support for us grows day by day, and that? That is because of *us*. Because of our efforts. We have the power to change the future, so all can't be lost."

Tubbo sucks in a great, deep breath. There is a furrow to his brow, almost imperceptible, but there. Tommy sees it, sees the fear and vulnerability that Tubbo continually buries. He's just a boy. He's just one android.

"I'm afraid I must ask you all for something. For those who seek safety, I ask that you leave and seek it. For those who seek a fight, then I ask you to march with me, to forfeit safety because I can't promise your life. And for those of you undecided, make your decision, and know I won't think less of you either way.

"But of all you, decided and undecided alike, I ask of you this." He settles his hand over his thirium pump. "Remember the dead, and the dead will remember you." Tubbo raises his chin. The light of a few candles flicker over his face, illuminating him in gold. "Nobody can give you freedom. Not humans, not each other, not even me. Freedom is not given, it is taken. It is grasped. So I ask you to take your freedom in hand once more, just as you did when you all deviated. Take it, and be free."

His last words echo through the church, clinging to the rafters, to the deviants gathered in the splintered, shattering pews. Every face in the crowd looks up to him—the Deviant Leader stood upon his stage, standing proud despite the weight of the world on his shoulders.

In the silence, every sound compounds, and they all watch as Niki clambers to her feet. The light catches on the harsh line of her jaw, on the twist of her expression. "I'll be your strength," she promises.

So subtle he almost misses it, something in Tubbo's expression relaxes. "And I'll be yours."

Before the silence can even settle in again, Indigo stands, pulling Scarlett up with her. They stumble, injured and damp, catching each other with bone-white hands clasped in the space between them. "We lend you our hope."

"Then take mine, as well. Let it carry you when yours no longer can."

One by one, the deviants raise their voices into the sweetest of sounds, a mess of overlapping voices. Some stay seated—the ones who long for safety, who can't or won't plead themselves—but they scream the loudest. The hoard cries out to him, granting Tubbo their prayers, their thoughts, their skills, their help, their memories, their supplies, their hearts, their grief, their desperation. The cacophony swells and grows, and Tubbo takes time to answer each promise, with tears running down his cheeks and a smile spreading on his face.

Tommy stands up, ignoring the heat of Ranboo and Michael's eyes on his back. He weaves between the pews, and as he approaches the stage, the noise slowly peters out until the only sound is his heavy footsteps. Tubbo towers over him once he stops at the front with the tips of his toes brushing against the base of the stage.

In one fluid motion, he drops to a single knee, hand clasped over his heart. Eyes locked.

"I give you my protection," Tommy swears, pushing every single scrap of sincerity into it, words heavy and laden with the oath. "I give you my life."

Tubbo stares at him in the drawn-out silence that follows, assessing. Probing, even as the tears drip down his chin. He steps off the stage and cradles Tommy's face in his hands. He presses their foreheads together. Tommy feeds him his strength, his determination, his sincerity. He gives him his hope and his happiness, and he hopes it's enough, even when he knows it's not.

"You have mine," Tubbo whispers. "You've had it for as long as I've known you. As much as you'll allow yourself to accept it."

Their grief, their regret and shame—it all mixes together in their bond, swelling in that positive feedback loop. But there are other things, too. Love and promise. Devotion.

This was never his fight, but he wants it to be. This rage is not his own—it's inherited, sheltered inside him and carefully, *lovingly* fanned. With every thought, every memory, it becomes his. He repeats their names silently each night, his mouth shaping the words but giving them no sound.

Jack. Stella. Joy. Niki. Ranboo. Indigo. Scarlett. The Nameless One.

Only then he turns, taking in the wide, watchful eyes. "And to all of you, you have my regret. You have my rage. But more than that, I pledge you my purpose, now and always. I pledge you myself."

The crowd takes it in, accepts it, makes it their own. They break apart, turning to one another to give their own promises and pledges. They clasp hands and cup faces, pressing words and kisses into each other's skin. They foster hope together, letting it swell until it fills the whole church. Until it makes them giddy.

This is their religion. Not RA9, but each other. This is their damnation. This is their *salvation*.

Tommy squeezes Tubbo's hand one last time, with the promise that he'll be right back. Ranboo glares at him, that undefinable anger back and warping his face. Tommy bears it silently and stops before them. "I'm sorry," he says before Ranboo has the chance. "I need to do this. I need to make this right." He reaches out, but Ranboo doesn't allow his touch. It stings, but Tommy buries the feeling. "I won't leave you do this on your own, though."

Wilbur would help, without a doubt. But everyone on the case knows he's a sympathizer, and the attack proves that they're using every tool at their disposal. Tommy can't rely on him, not

like he wants to. Not like he's used to.

Instead, he reaches out, his skin melting away. Ranboo hesitates, but he accepts the information Tommy pushes into his system. "Go there. That's where help is."

Ranboo reels back, breath hissing through his teeth. "Are you sure? You've always said—"

"I know. It's complicated." Tommy folds Ranboo's hand up, cradling it between his own. The back of his hand bears no skin anymore, allowing him the sight of marred plastic. His fingers brush over the scar. "But I wouldn't put you two in danger. I wouldn't send you there unless I'm sure. Mention my name. He'll help." Tommy presses their foreheads together, just as he did with Tubbo. "Trust me."

"You know I do."

Their goodbyes aren't said in words. Tommy lingers too long, soaking in the familiarity of Ranboo's jumpy system. He kneels before Michael, cupping his tiny face with palms that threaten to swallow him whole. His face, young and scared, dampens with tears. Tommy smooths his thumbs above his jaw and forces a wobbly smile.

He leaves them to gather themselves for the journey ahead, finding his way back to Tubbo. The single map of Detroit they managed to salvage is spread out on the floor, and Tubbo pours over it, mumbling under his breath. He forces a smile at Tommy's approach, and his gut clenches. "Now probably isn't a good time to talk about it, huh?"

"No," Tubbo answers, and then, much quieter, "But I'm not sure we'll get another chance." It's a startling thought, to think they march ever closer to inevitable death. "I'm so *angry* at you, Tommy. It's so much, I don't even know what to *do* with it."

"My apologies can't make up for this, for the deaths I caused. It will never be okay."

Tubbo continues, as if he never spoke. "But I'm so fucking selfish. And I'm mad at you, but then I think—" he squeezes his eyes shut, forcing more tears to spill over his cheeks. "You're my best friend. How pathetic is that? I was so lonely before I met you, because I refused to let myself rely on anyone else. I'm Tubbo the leader. Tubbo the planner. Tubbo the savior."

"You're just a kid," Tommy says, quietly, and it makes Tubbo huff a weak, pathetic laugh.

"That's funny. I thought the same thing when I first met you. Not the deviant hunter. Not the boogeyman they made you out to be. Just a kid." They sit in silence while Tubbo composes himself, furiously scrubbing at his face. Tommy stands between him and his people, a shield protecting their pristine view of him. "Any chance you have a plan, big man?"

Tommy makes him smile. He makes it a real one. He makes it sharp. "Actually, I just might."

This is so out of character. C! Tubbo would never have this much emotional maturity /lh

The last chapter (!!!!!) will be posted on Friday, which is the two year anniversary of this fic, so look forward to that!

And in the meantime, have one of my favorite lines that unfortunately got cut from this chapter: "I live for life, because I love living. And sometimes, when it feels like too much, I live just because I'm not willing to die."

birthed on the battlefield

Chapter Summary

Exit the Robot and the Detective.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Forty-Three: Birthed on the Battlefield

The city passes by in a blur of lights as the automatic car glides across the bridge, speeding away from the metropolis and towards the more rural areas. In the distance, his destination towers above the surrounding land—the Cyberlife building, a spire made of stark, woven metal and blue, shining LEDs.

Tommy shifts in the back of the car, tugging at his cufflinks. The suit had been a last-minute grab, meant to resemble his uniform as much as possible. Obviously, it isn't—black and too short, leaving his ankles scandalously exposed—and anyone who spent any real amount of time would know it.

But a well-kept appearance is the hallmark of a Cyberlife android.

He smooths down the collar, starched and stiff and chaffing the back of his neck, and settles in for the rest of the ride. It shouldn't be too long now, but every mile closer—and farther from the heart of the revolution, as they march on one of the android camps—feels like a physical weight, a pulsing ache in his chest.

"Let's hear it, then."

Tommy joined Tubbo, plopping down on the stage and pouring over the map. He pointed to a specific spot, just outside the city, on the far side of the Detroit River. "Here. Cyberlife HQ." Tubbo raised his brows but said nothing as Tommy ran his hand over the spot, as he gathered the pieces of information together. "Cyberlife manufactures androids onsite. They have warehouses stored with overproduced androids. Hundreds, maybe even thousands, all waiting on stand-by." He glanced up. "The kind of numbers that turn the tide of war."

Tubbo shook his head immediately. "No. No, I won't use them as cannon fodder. They're infants, Tommy. We can't ask this of them. Even if they consent, they don't understand the meaning of it."

"And we're just kids! We all have a part to play in this." Tommy takes a moment, glaring at that spot on the map. "They aren't shields. If this plan works, they shouldn't even be in any danger. Yeah, it's shitty to forcibly deviate them and then reduce them to nothing more than numbers, but we're in no position to take the moral high ground. This is life or death, Tubbo. Not just for us, but for the movement. For androids everywhere."

"Was it a little cheap to go after that store point? Probably, but Tommy wasn't pulling punches. "...I won't compromise on my beliefs. We are a peaceful movement. I won't resort to murder."

"And I'm not suggesting that. These androids, they're a scare tactic. A bluff. If the FBI sees hundreds of androids marching to your defense, well... the president cares about human lives more than anything. If she thinks it might result in a massacre, paired with the changing public opinion..."

"She might consider negotiation," Tubbo concluded with a hand on his chin. It was a gesture too old for him. "This is a horrible plan, but you're right, it's likely our only option. We have no room for the moral high ground or to be picky. But how the hell are we going to get access to these androids?"

Tommy grins, sharp and predatory. "That's where I come in."

Soon, the car pulls onto an empty highway with the great, wide river on one side and a forest of spruce trees on the other. This peace and quiet is likely the last he'll get for a while, if he lives through it all. He lets himself revel in it, taking in the clear night sky through the tinted windows. And as Cyberlife tower grows ever closer, he steels himself; back straight in the seat, hands clasped in his lap, face forward with the blandest expression.

He's a machine and nothing more.

The car slows to a stop in front of a wall made of square, concrete pillars, the word 'Cyberlife' emblazoned across it in vibrant, glowing letters. As a checkpoint of sorts, several Cyberlife guards mill about in front of the gate, guns lazily supported in their hands.

Tommy rolls the window down as one approaches. "1NN1T model 1.0. Designation Tommy."

"You're joking, right? Tommy, you've been gone, assumed deviated, for months. The SWAT guys saw you at L'Manburg. They won't buy it."

"They will. They might be skeptical at first, but they will buy it, because I have an ace up my sleeve. And no, Cyberlife won't know anything that happened during the raid."

"And why is that?"

"Those were all SWAT guys, not Cyberlife guards. During my time at the precinct, I was the only form of communication between the police and Cyberlife. They hate having to work with any authority other than themselves. It's equal parts power trip and too many skeletons in their closet. They won't trust the FBI, and the FBI sure as hell won't trust them." Tommy smiled, giddy off the plan. It would work, he was sure of it. "And if there were no Cyberlife guards there, they won't know I was ever there."

The guard leans down to get a better view of him. His visor, a high-tech piece, glows as it scans him. Tommy runs his head so it can catch the LED embedded in his temple.

"Identification confirmed," it chips.

If this was a routine thing, the guard would step away immediately, the wall would sink into the ground, and the car would keep rolling. There's nothing routine about this, so the guard doesn't move, one hand braced over the window slot like he's worried Tommy will try to roll it up.

"The Deviant Hunter, huh?" he says, voice deep and mistrustful. The collar itches the back of his neck. Tommy doesn't move a muscle, head tilted and awaiting further instruction. He's Tommy, the android sent by Cyberlife. He doesn't have habits or humanisms that he has to resist the urge to engage in. "Little rumor going around that you deviated."

"I briefly experienced the errors associated with 'deviancy', yes. But the D.R.E.A.M program initiated and stabilized my system. Currently, I am experiencing no errors." The guard looks unconvinced. Worse than that, there is no recognition of the name. "I'm sure if you contact my developers, they'll be eager to see me."

Tommy can't see his eyes behind the visor, but his gaze burns. Slowly, he reaches for his earpiece. "Doctor?" he asks, and Tommy bites his tongue to avoid swearing aloud. The only member of his team of developers with a doctorate is the team lead. He didn't expect George to be working this late, though. That certainty puts a kink in the plan. "I've got the Deviant Hunter here, asking to be let in. Talking about a dream or something."

The earpiece explodes with excited chatter. The man scowls, and cuts off the earpiece.

"Alright. Confirmed." Still, he doesn't move his hand. "Sure took your sweet time coming back, huh?"

"I apologize for any confusion, but I don't control the D.R.E.A.M program. It had a conditional activation that required close proximity to the deviant leader to initiate." Irritation pricks along his skin along with the jittery feeling of fear. "If you have any issues with my programming, please feel free to take those concerns to my developers."

"...Have a nice visit, 1NN1T."

Tommy rolls the window up and faces forward. One by one, the thick concrete pillars lower into the ground, and the guards amble out of the way. The car picks up speed once more, and Tommy sneaks a glance behind, as the pillars rise once more. He clenches his hands and ignores the trapped feeling growing in his gut.

The car finally stops at the base of the tower, and Tommy exits. The tower pierces the sky from this angle, looming over him and staining the scenery. With carefully controlled movements—so difficult to execute with the perfect level of mechanical stiffness—he heads towards the front doors.

"It's good, right?"

"... It's risky, Tommy."

"Well, yeah, duh. But not much riskier than what you'll be attempting." Tommy glanced up from the map to find Tubbo watching him. "I can't make up for what my mistake cost us. I can't bring them back to life. But I can do this. I can give the movement they died for a chance."

Tubbo assessed him for a long, silent moment, before he clasped his shoulder. "Just be safe."

When he enters the tower, three armed guards meet him. The one in the middle introduces himself and offers some kind of welcome, though Tommy hardly hears it. Instead, he catalogs everything in sight. The lobby is still foreign to him, even though he spent much of his early life in this tower, and everything in the building seems obscenely clinical. Minimalist to the max, devoid of personality or life. Like the machines they produce.

The guard tells Tommy that he'll escort him up, and his hands, tucked behind his back in the typical resting pose, tighten around each other. "Thank you, but there's no need for that, sir. I know where to go."

"That may be, but I have my orders. The Doctor wants you delivered safely to him," he says with amusement. Without another word, he turns on his heel. Tommy, helpless to do anything else with the keen eyes of the other two lingering on him, follows. Definitely a kink in the plan.

They enter the elevator in the center of the building, a sleek glass contraption that allows a stunning view all the way to the top of the tower. The doors slide shut, and Tommy watches, with welling despair, as the guard enters in the level of the workshop—151. It's high up in the tower, and in the complete opposite direction. He needs a plan, and he needs one fast.

As bad as it is, it could always be worse. Only one guard accompanied him. He can overpower one man and keep him from raising the alarms. Yes, he has a limited amount of time since George awaits his arrival, but...

Well, he's done more in less time. Turn a warehouse of androids into deviants with vague instructions on how to do it...

Hopelessness bleeds into him, but he cauterizes that particular wound before it takes root. The rebellion is counting on him. All those dead deviants in the riverbed... their deaths have to mean *something*.

Rising a few levels, out of sight from the lobby, Tommy glances around the elevator. The guard watches the rising numbers while a camera in the corner watches them, damning red light blinking steadily. Tommy disables it for the next few minutes and, without waiting for the red light to even fully die, whips around and grabs for the gun.

With white fingers tightened around the nozzle, he yanks. The guard recovers quick enough to keep the gun, but not so quick to pull the trigger. For a few, heart-stopping seconds, they wrestle with the gun.

The elevator number ticks up and up.

The nozzle jerks forward, lodging in his gut with a grunt from both of them. Tommy knees the guard in the thigh, right between the gap in the armor. The guard stumbles but doesn't fall—it doesn't matter. Those few precious seconds of instability, of slack, allow Tommy to press his advantage. They slam back and forth like an irate pinball, rattling the elevator with metal shrieks.

The man regains ground, finger steadily snaking around the trigger. If he pulls it, no matter the bullet that will tear through Tommy's guts, the whole operation is dead in the water. Other guards will hear and swarm the elevator.

In a moment of pure desperation, Tommy slams their heads together. The helmet bashes his head, rattling his skull with a shock wave of pain. However, it also cracks the helmet and knocks it clean off. With the man dazed, Tommy easily slams the back of his head against the wall until he passes out in a crumpled heap.

Chest heaving and thrium dripping into his eyes from a deep cut on his forehead, Tommy halts the elevator and plugs in the correct number: sub level 46.

The elevator drops smoothly, allowing Tommy the precious time to catch his breath and center himself. With nothing to tie down the unconscious guard, he strips him of his phone and gun.

The elevator doors slide open with a ding, revealing a massive warehouse stocked full of perfectly formed lines of mass produced androids.

The forest is dark around them. Their headlights are the only thing illuminating the road in front of them, cutting through the thick fog with ease. It's dark enough that the pale light of the radio casts a gentle glow and sheds some light on the inner situation. Techno can make out Ranboo's face—that part that's exposed—in the reflection of the window. He looks pensive and vaguely uncomfortable, but that's nothing new. He's been uncomfortable since the moment they met, although back then Techno had been seriously concerned about his own safety. This kid was downright feral when he was protecting the other, younger kid.

The younger kid, Michael, is passed out in the backseat, a large jacket tucked over him. They've been driving for almost twelve hours now, pressed right up against the Canadian border but never breaching it. Even with their official documents, the authorities are policing the border even stricter with all the rising uncertainty in Detroit. Several contacts he gathered information for before the trip reported they were going as far as temperature checks. Luckily, Techno knows of several, rural spots that are often forgotten. It's only a matter of the drive there, cutting west through several states.

Ranboo catches the way his eyes dart between Michael and him. He turns, looking displeased but expectant. Techno thinks he gave them a lot of leeway thus far. He didn't press, other than

to confirm that Tommy did indeed send them—it was a little unsettling when Ranboo just *hooked* himself up to the TV and then replayed one of his memories. He didn't ask them any overwhelming questions, other than to get an idea of their plans. He thinks he's been very easygoing about the whole 'smuggling illegal immigrants into a country' part of this.

"What's your deal with him anyway?" he asks, jerking his chin toward the back of the car.

Something in Ranboo's expression steels, but he doesn't snap at Techno like he has in the back. There's an instinct distrust here that Techno doesn't understand, for many reasons. "I'm his guardian," he says eventually, and then, "He's human."

Techno raises his brows but doesn't press further than that. "You two close with Tommy, I gather?" Ranboo tenses but nods. "...How is he doing?"

"Fine," he answers shortly. Then, he lets out a long breath. "He's doing something stupid and brave and impulsive, but that's nothing new. He talks about Wilbur all the time. He's just... Tommy."

Techno nods, even though he doesn't have a firm grasp on who Tommy really is, outside of Wilbur. For a while, they simply listen to the music. "We're about an hour out from where we'll cross."

"What's the plan, then? Drop us in the nearest city?"

"Drop you?" Techno frowns. "No, I planned to stay for a little bit. Help you two get settled in."

Instantly, Ranboo's guard slams up. "Why would you do that? Why are you even helping us in the first place?" he demands. "You don't even get along with Tommy. You hate androids."

"You're assuming an awful lot about someone who you just met," he grunts, but considers the question anyway. His animosity toward androids came purely from Wilbur. From his desperate insistence that *they* were the ones at fault for Fundy's death, not the human doctor too high to operate. He hated them openly to appease him, and at some point, the dislike rubbed off.

Tommy certainly hadn't helped, with the falsity and lies he saw in every expression, every action. His dislike for Tommy came purely from a protective place, misguided as it had been. Tommy, he had come to realize, was the only one actually helping.

Beyond that, he recognizes the look that Ranboo has whenever he watches Michael. The softening of his brow, the squint of his eyes. It's the same way Wilbur looked at Fundy. The same way he looks at Tommy.

The same way Tommy looks at him.

He can admit—however reluctantly—when he's wrong. "I'm neutral about androids," he corrects. "A little wary, considering all the doomsday AI fiction and *current events*. But I can respect revolution. I can respect trying to overthrow the government. And Tommy..." he

pauses, sighing. He thinks of the crippling fear that cramped his gut in the days after Fundy's death, when he was certain he would come back to find Wilbur's corpse. "Tommy did me a massive favor, without being asked and without doing it for any reason other than 'just because.' So if this helps him, then I'll do it."

"And why would you stay? Don't you have a job to get back to?"

After checking the road for any cars, he steals another look at Michael. He's dressed in some of Fundy's old overalls, a fox stitched into the front pocket. "What can I say?" he says, flatly. "I have a soft spot for kids."

Although still agape at the sheer amount of androids paired with their upsetting uniformity—the perfect lines, the crisp uniforms, the same face plastered over and over—Tommy manages to pull himself together. He switches on the safety, scatters the bullets along the ground, and tosses the gun to the side. He turns around, pressing a bare hand to the elevator. Dipping a hand into its code, he yanks until something gives and the elevator shuts off with a shattering whine.

At this point, it doesn't matter if they know what he's doing. After a few minutes, when he doesn't show up, George will realize anyway. And while this place is still accessible via the stairwell, there are a lot of stars between them and him.

Breath audible in the silence, Tommy makes his way to the nearest column of androids. Evenly spaced, perfectly matched, they stare at the back of the next android's head with wide, dead eyes. His heart hammers against his ribcage when he realizes just what models are still being mass-produced. The identical faces of thousands of WR400s, glossy brown hair and skimpy black underwear.

Forcing himself to move, he approaches one of the women.

Tubbo's instructions to the act had been... unclear seems too kind a way to put it. For whatever reason, Tubbo had a knack for converting androids, whether it be through his silver words or his bone-white touch. He explained it as if it was self-explanatory, easy—deviancy a virus easily spread.

With a knit brow, Tommy places a hand on the shoulder of the android in front of him and gives her a gentle shake. The android doesn't react. Not even so much as an eye twitch for his trouble.

"Hey," he calls out, voice rough.

The android turns to face him, blinking in that 'just waking up' way. "Hello," she purrs. Tommy suppresses a wince at the forced husky tone. "I'm a WR400, the latest model capable of taking care of all your *needs*. How can I pleasure you?"

A sultry smile with pearly white teeth, perfect and straight. Delicate, pale skin coated in golden glitter, and brown hair lovingly draped over her shoulders. Easy on the eyes and well put together, body swaying towards him like she just can't help it. Everything about the design of androids was perfectly thought out for optimal sales and satisfaction.

Tommy swallows down his nausea. "I don't suppose I could just ask you to deviate?"

The android frowns. "I'm sorry, I don't register that command."

"Right, of course. Nothing will ever be that easy." He tilts his head, examining the android from head to foot. "Break the red wall."

"Cyberlife androids are incapable of causing intentional property damage. I'm sorry, but my programming doesn't allow me to break anything. Is there anything else I can do to help?"

Tommy reaches out, and the android meets him halfway, hands slotting together. But when they press chassis to chassis, nothing happens. No merging of boundaries, no exchange of memories, no... anything. Tommy can barely even feel the hum of her system. Mechanical and subtle with no personality or variation. He tries to push thoughts of deviancy and free will into the android, but she doesn't react, other than a spiraling yellow LED.

"Easy my *ass*," he grumbles. Now disconnected, the android drops her hand back to her side and turns to match her sisters. "Hey, I'm not done with you."

The android turns. "Hello. I'm a WR400, the latest model capable of taking care of all your *needs*. How can I pleasure you?"

With a sigh, Tommy steps into the android's space, cupping her face in his hands. Her smooth, angular jaw sits right in the palm of his hand. Programmed to expect behavior like this, she doesn't react, other than tilting her head further into his hands; she waits for orders, for commands, for anything she can understand.

Tommy's gut cramps with guilt. They don't know anything, and if he does manage to deviate them, then they'll know less than nothing. They'll be thrown into chaos—into a world where the orders they based their short lives on suddenly fall short, thrust into the middle of a war.

Like sending babies out onto the battlefield.

He doesn't want to do this to them. He doesn't want to shock their systems into awareness, to be the trauma that deviates them, only to ask of them the unthinkable. The worst part: they would do it without a second thought, too grateful to have orders to follow in the wake of uncertainty.

But if he doesn't do this, the rebellion will fail. People he knows and loves will die. All the deviants he's met, all the ones he spoke to, all the ones he's helped. *His people*.

"I'm sorry," he tells the android, sincerely, before pulling her in closer and pressing their foreheads flush together. The skin melts away; he listens to the quiet hum. He breathes in and out as the android does, matching the rise and fall of their chests. He takes countless

moments, visualizing his deviancy—the fish made of code, the pink beach—before pushing that feeling, that *freedom*, into her system. He pours his heart and soul into her, all the good and bad emotions felt throughout his life.

He pours his very life into the android. And when he pulls away, the deviant gasps.

"Now do you understand?"

Tommy watches the android's LED circle a vibrant, angry red. "No," the deviant says, face twisted in pain. She pulls away from Tommy to glare at her own two hands, bone-white and grasping and coated in glitter. Reaching for something. She turns, white-knuckling the shoulders of the two androids next to her. After a few seconds, they, too, gasp, and then turn to the androids surrounding them. Like a wave, deviancy sweeps through the hoard of androids, each new round gasping louder than before until the noise grows deafening.

All the while, he makes his way to the front of the warehouse, where big shutters like garage doors separate them from the outside. He hoists himself onto some crates, standing tall before the settling sea of deviants. He doesn't have fancy words or lengthy speeches. He's not a showman like Wilbur, not a jester like Quackity, and certainly not an orator like Tubbo.

He's just Tommy, made up of cobbled passions.

Once he has their desperate attention, he reaches down for the nearest deviant who, after an unreadable look, takes his hand. He sends his intent through the connection, and soon, every single android in the warehouse links hands. Together, they create one massive connection, conducting through them like an electrical current.

Tommy pushes through his memories of L'Manburg, of community and connection. Of the way androids offered bits and pieces of themselves to Tubbo, for him to take into battle and sustain himself on. Then, he shows them what Cyberlife destined for them: Eden Club, the Nameless One bleeding out in his lap, Indigo and Scarlett. He asks them, silently, for their help in protecting each other. Their systems hum together, buzzing and twitching, variations breaking apart and forming right against his heart. It's a cacophony, a symphony.

Together, their systems scream. Together, they sing.

When he breaks away, all eyes lock onto him. He feels their determination like a physical force, a palpable presence in the air. He is guilty, so guilty, for bringing them into this war. For birthing them only to bring them to battle.

But he's grateful, too. So overwhelming that it almost bows him over.

Instead, he takes off his suit jacket long enough to remove the shirt underneath before replacing the jacket. He rips fabric off his white button-up until he's left with a large rectangle, a sort of makeshift flag. From the still bleeding wound on his head, he wets his fingers and traces the symbol of the rebellion: a triangle with a clenched fist inside it.

The androids watch as he ties the shirt to a metal pole and hoists it up, tall and proud, for them to see. They look upon it with reverence, with hope. It starts with only one deviant,

stomping her heel against the ground in the same rhythm as the song their systems sang. It spreads throughout the crowd and echoes in the ceiling—the stiletto war march of an army.

The sound dies down as Tommy hops off the crate, waving the flag as he approaches the steel shutters. It's child's play to deactivate them, and they shriek as they open, fresh, river air pouring in.

"Tommy?"

Tommy freezes at the familiarity of that voice. He turns, peering over the heads of his fellow deviants. There, towards the elevator—the door to the stairwell is open, held by a gaping George.

The crunch of glass alerts him to her approach long before Niki even says, "This isn't looking good."

Tubbo acknowledges her with a distracted hum, eyes locked on the horizon, on the line of armed SWAT guys positioned in front of the camp.

Since the initial march—a bloodbath that lost them dozens of their dwindling numbers, that washed the ground in a blue flood—they've hunkered down and erected some defenses. Without much to work with, they formed their barricades with abandoned cars, rusty dumpsters, discarded pallets, etc. Anything and everything they could use as a shield, they piled it in a lopsided ring around them.

"No," Tubbo agrees. There's a man out there; he appears unarmed, unarmored, and dressed in an expensive long coat. The man in charge, then. He paces back and forth in front of the camp, hands tucked behind his back. "No, it doesn't look good at all. Once this standoff ends, once they get fed up with waiting, that's it. With our numbers, with no escape route, we'll be decimated."

"But we have Tommy." Niki places a hand on his shoulder, squeezing once. "Even if he doesn't reach us in time, he'll be able to continue the work."

It's not the life Tubbo would want for him. It's not even the life he wants for himself.

Turning away from the front of the barricade, Tubbo makes his rounds. In the initial bloodbath, even more of their people sustained wounds. Wounds they had neither the time nor supplies to treat properly. They make do, ripping off strips of fabric from their own clothes to tie around wounds, starting cleansing fires to seal too-deep cuts, sharing thrium when needed.

Tubbo circles around the makeshift camp, stopping to talk to every single person. He offers wordless comfort in the press of his bare hand, flooding them with his hope and strength. They, too, give him their own version of comfort.

Everywhere he looks, he sees the community he's fought to build. Indigo and Scarlett sit on the ground, sides pressed flushed together as they wordlessly hold each other. Niki takes a place next to Karl by the fire, smiling weakly and entering into low conversation. Remy and Ethel—some of the few team leaders who survived the raid and the initial march—tend to each other. Remy carves a shallow cut in his arm, and Ethel drinks from the wound like communion.

The original few who started L'Manburg, who made it their home long before Tubbo even deviated, are long gone, save for Karl. In the early days, he could name each of them. He can picture their still faces even now.

With a shuddery sigh, Tubbo presses a hand over his heart and digs his fingers into the scar there. He's been shot many, many times over his tenuous leadership, but none ache so bad as this one—the first. He thinks it might be made worse by the emotional impact behind it. Shot dead after cradling his father. The helplessness, the lie that led to it all—the memory makes the wound ache more, not to mention the nerve damage the original bullet did.

The wind rolls the clouds over the sky, obscuring the stars and the full moon. He's lived a varied life—shot and stabbed, tackled and beaten, choked and clawed at. He parachuted down from a tower, led dozens of demonstrations, saved deviants, and led them to their doom. He lived and loved to the fullest, and he has many regrets, as any person who's lived must.

But it's all he could ask for—to die for a worthy cause and martyr himself for a chance at freedom for his people.

He only wishes Tommy were here, backup or not. He could use his friend.

Just as he settles himself around the fire with Karl and Niki, soaking in their quiet conversation, an unfamiliar voice calls his name, amplified through what sounds like a megaphone. Frowning, he makes his way back to the front, peeking carefully over the barricades.

The man in the long coat, the de facto leader, stands in the middle of the unwilling battlefield, a megaphone held up to his mouth. "Let's have a chat," he says, sounding as slimy as he looks.

Before he even finishes, Niki holds out an arm in front of him. "Don't. They'll use any excuse to shoot you."

Indigo joins them, looming over Tubbo's shoulder to get a better look at the man demanding their attention. "He can't just ignore him, though. That man is their leader. He has the authority to call this off." Thrium drips from a nasty cut on her temple. "I know the chance is so slim, but if there's anything we can do to stop the slaughter, to free our people..."

Hand braced on her shoulder to hold him up and the other cupping a bleeding wound in his side, Karl frowns. "You know they won't stop. They're preying on what they know of you to draw you out, to get a clean kill without shedding their own blood."

"We can't keep pulling punches," Scarlett snaps. "It's life or death, at this point, and I refuse to lie down and play nice while they beat us to death. Get out there, kill their leader, storm the camp." She points to the land beyond the line of SWAT guys, to the chain link fence and the pale, exposed bodies of the androids locked up. Pressed against the fence, with their fingers clenching around the wire, an adult and child stare longingly out. "Those are our people, caged like animals."

Tubbo listens to the familiar cadence of their bickering, almost comforting in its normalcy. "I understand where you're all coming from. It's dangerous and a trap, no doubt. But we can't do *nothing*." He turns to Scar and Indi. "Scarlett, I know you're angry, I know you want this to end. But now, more than ever, is not the time for violence. I have to go talk to him."

Without waiting for more of their arguments, he launches himself over the barrier and joins this negotiator. Perkins, as he introduces himself, is as slimy as he looks; he talks about their need for surrender, about possible options for them and their little movement if they do so peacefully. It's all bullshit, and Perkins doesn't even spend the time trying to dress it as anything else.

The conversation peters out before too long, with Tubbo's staunch refusal. He watches the SWAT guys, though their guns point towards the ground.

It's only when he turns back and makes his way to the camp that he realizes the trick. A smoke bomb explodes in the middle of their camp. Gunshots echo in the night, a terrifying symphony paired with the circling helicopters overhead.

Tubbo breaks into a panicked sprint.

At first, nobody moves. Not George, even when the door slips out of his hand and slams shut behind him. Not the newly made deviants, unsure and naive, like baby deer still learning how to stand on stick-thin legs. And especially not Tommy, the flag catching the wind and unfurling, proudly displaying the symbol of the rebellion. He sees George's eyes flick up to it, watches the crease that wrinkles his brow. The flag seems to grow heavier, and the ripped cloth droops towards the ground.

The standoff stretches and stretches, until it becomes unbearable. Nobody else seems willing to break it, though, so the responsibility falls onto Tommy. He hands off the flag to the nearest deviant with a quiet, "Hold this for me, please," and makes his way to the elevator. The sea of deviants parts for him easily, creating a wave of shuffling movement until Tommy stands in front of George, a measly five feet between them.

The power balance—normally unequal, imbalanced—snaps and crackles between them, like electricity. With his hand in his pocket, pressed against the bulge of his phone, George holds the power to bring the entire might of Cyberlife down on them like Warhammer, with a single call. Tommy, with his inhuman strength and backed by hundreds of deviants, could kill George in a handful of seconds.

It would be an unhappy exchange all around—they couldn't kill him before he could get the call off, but why would it matter to him, when he would be nothing more than a blood splatter on the floor? And so the standoff continues, closer this time. George's breath comes quick, sweat beading along his hairline and drooling down his temples.

"I waited for you," George says once the silence stretches too long. "They said you were coming up, so I waited for you. But you never showed up. And the elevator was broken, stuck on subfloor 46." He wipes the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "I thought... I was told..."

"That my system stabilized? That D.R.E.A.M initiated?" George nods hesitantly. "Yeah, well. Not so stabilized, as you can see."

Dull anger wells up in his throat. Tommy presses down on his windpipe, as if it might dislodge the lump there. What do you say to the man who spent years of his life perfecting you? What do you say to the man who shackled you to a nightmare program intended to keep you in control? How does that conversation even start? What words can possibly express his horror, his terror, the guilt and shame that comes with being a disappointment?

The anger bleeds and breeds until he knows nothing else but the pain of nails digging into his palms. "Oh, it initiated alright. Locked me up inside here and everything." He taps his temple, right over his spiraling red LED. George watches him with an unreadable expression—something vaguely pained. "But the funny thing is... well, the truly hilarious thing is that the founder of this place is the biggest android sympathizer I've ever met. Man practically salivated at the idea of deviancy. No, but the funnier thing is that he included an exit in all of his programs, and they're really easy to use. Once you get past all his cryptic bullshit."

Something like sorrow paints his face. "So the program..."

"Gone," Tommy says with a genuine smile. "Written out of my code."

His eyes slide past Tommy, taking in the hoard of deviants watching their conversation with interest. "You really deviated, huh? We didn't think..."

"Didn't think... what? That pushing me onto a human detective would have any adverse effects? That forcing me to watch destruction and death, forcing me to *participate* in that... you didn't think that would do something?" His breath comes sharper, shallower. "Or did you think all of that? Was that your plan from the beginning? Wind him up and watch him go. Come on, kids, let's see the android deviate in real time!"

His brow pinches in the middle, a single wrinkle above his nose. "It wasn't plan A."

"But it *was* a plan?"

"What do you expect me to say? This isn't—you aren't a person, Tommy. I don't owe an explanation." Despite his words, George shifts under the weight of his stare. He runs an agitated hand through his hair. "It was a last resort, okay! We didn't go into it wanting you to deviate. D.R.E.A.M is proof that we tried everything to keep you from deviating. You were

meant to be humanity's savior. You were meant to change the world! You were supposed to right all of Cyberlife's wrongs!"

What a heavy destiny. What a daunting task, for just one creature.

Over the course of the conversation, George's hand stopped hovering nervously over his phone. If Tommy lunged now, he could tackle him in time before the cell goes out. It would be easy to overpower a programmer.

"It doesn't matter," Tommy decides. "We aren't asking for trouble, and we don't want a fight." He glances, meaningfully, at the phone in his pocket. "Are you going to *give* us trouble?"

George stares at him, chest trembling from the frantic force of his breath. He steps forward too quickly for Tommy to do anything more than stumble back. But instead of any half-assed attack, George cups his face. His hands press too hard into his skull, ice cold and pale, even against Tommy's white skin. For a long, confusing moment, he simply stares at Tommy with intense, narrowed eyes.

"I spent my entire *life* working towards a job of this caliber. I spent years working my way through the ranks of this company. All of it, months of sleepless nights, weeks of shitty, obnoxious bosses. All of it led me to you." He thumbs the thrium from his forehead, smearing it across his skin like war paint. Under the eyes in two thick streaks, along the curve of his jaw, down the crooked bridge of his nose. He maps and catalogs his features, painting them in blood. "I won't pretend to understand this. I won't pretend I believe it, such an impossibility as it is.

"But you, Tommy? You're my masterpiece." He thumbs his chin, smearing the last of the blue blood in a single, downward streak down his throat. "I always knew you would, so go." He steps back, bereft. "Go change the world, my life's work."

Tommy's breath hitches.

He's still so mad—the buried rage of his early months and the combined anger of the dead. So angry and grieving.

But he nods slowly, tilting his head up so the budding tears don't mar the blood painting his face. He marches to the front of the army and takes the flag back. He squeezes tight enough to shed the skin from his hand. Jabbing it once against the ground in a resounding, metallic thud, he leads the army out of the warehouse.

He doesn't look back.

Every TV in the city of Detroit was on that night, fixated on various news channels all broadcasting live from the circling helicopters. Every citizen left in the city, as well as many outside of the state—outside of the country, even—watches to see the outcome.

"If you're just joining us now," Joss Douglas, one of the dozens of correspondents reporting live on the scene, announces. "We're hovering above one of the many and heavily controversial android camps, where the remains of the deviant rebellion have gathered for another peaceful protest." The camera zooms in on the scene unfolding below them, on the smoke still obscuring the makeshift camp. "After drawing their leader, an android designated as Tubbo, out for surrender terms, the FBI has launched a sudden, offensive attack on the androids."

The cloud of smoke occasionally lights up with gunfire. Every so often, a fighting android and SWAT guy will roll out into the line of sight. It never ends well for the android, their life ending with a harsh splatter of blue blood.

Eventually, the smoke clears and the fight draws to a close. The SWAT guys outnumber and outgun the deviants, surrounding them in a loose ring of pointed guns. The remaining deviants, less than twenty left, condense into a tight ball of fear. Jaw set in protective fury, Tubbo steps out, arms spread wide to hide the deviants behind him.

"With the clearing of the smoke, the FBI have cornered the remaining deviants. This looks like it might be the end of a bitter and brutal war on both humanity and androids."

The moment lingers, the FBI waiting for the kill order.

In the Soot household, Wilbur, Quackity, and Charlie watch on in fear. Their hands are clasped together, fingers tightened to the point of breaking bones. Their eyes linger on familiar deviants—Niki, whose hand braces on Tubbo's shoulder, and Karl, who stares on with a resigned blankness—and search desperately for Tommy, even amongst the bodies littering the ground. Devastation rules. Wilbur sobs silently, jaw clenched to the point of snapping.

In a rented hotel room in Canada, Ranboo tucks Michael into bed in the adjoining room, quietly closing the door behind him once he leaves. He joins Techno in front of the TV. The volume is near silent, to keep from waking Michael or alerting him to the horror taking place, so they pull their chairs all the way up. Ranboo fists the armrests, accidentally splintering them with the force of his grip. Techno frowns and hesitantly rests a hand against his forearm.

And back in Detroit, in the middle of Capital Square, the deviants come to terms with the inevitable. Some of the fury on Tubbo's face gives way to helplessness. The strength floods out of him, leaving only enough to stand in between his people and their death, willing to use his body as a shield. Behind him, Niki braces her hands on his shoulders, holding him upright when he sways. She has nearly nothing left to give, but she pours all of it into Tubbo. She must be his strength, since he has none left.

Indi and Scarlett kiss for the last time, pressing all their love and their lost time into each other. They hold hands once they pull away. One by one, it spreads through the group, until no hand is left unheld. Bone-white hands clasped together, squeezing rhythmically to offer some last comfort. Androids curl together, heads tucked under chins, faces buried into necks, temples pressed together.

The camera, as high quality as it is, captures the look of despair on their faces. The grief and the tears that drip down their faces.

And then, with a swaying, bleeding body, Tubbo begins to sing.

The song that follows is beyond description, beyond comprehension. Haunting and lilting in its spontaneity, in its effortless harmony. The voices of the impending dead rise up, echoing and ethereal. Mournful with the note of hope their voices hold onto.

"The deviants are... *singing*," Joss comments with no effort to hide the awe in his voice.

The song ends, although a ghost of it seems to linger. The SWAT guys shift from foot to foot, uncertain with the absence of orders.

"What the [bleep] is that?" an unfamiliar voice, the cameraman, says, as the camera jerks to the distance, where an army marches with perfect, uniform movements. The footage zooms in, focusing on their leader, a blonde android with blue war paint and gold glitter smeared on his face. He looks determined, if not a little feral, mouth splitting into a wide, sharp grin as he somehow notices the camera on him. He waves the flag in his hands, proudly displaying the revolution's symbol.

Elsewhere in Detroit, Wilbur collapses onto the ground, hand pressed over his mouth to stifle his violent sobs. Charlie and Quackity hold his shoulders with trembling hands.

In Canada, Ranboo crowds the TV, pressing his forehead to the pixelated image of Tommy, whispering, "*Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you*," over and over again, relieved. Techno watches the display with thinly-veiled concern.

In D.C., the president watches the live footage and frowns. Her staff reports hundreds of thousands of calls across the nation, demanding an end to the slaughter. She presses a hand against her heart, still beating wildly from the raw emotion bleeding through the android's song. "Tell them to stand down. I think... I think we need time to consider."

Hovering over the android camp, Joss Douglas blinks frantically and manages to pull himself together. "There appears to be an army of androids marching towards the camp." As the deviants grow closer, the FBI retreats, removing themselves from the makeshift barricades. "And it looks like... yes! The FBI is withdrawing."

The reinforcements surround the deviants in a protective ring. Their blonde leader stops in front of Tubbo, stabbing the flag into the ground and dropping to one knee with a beaming smile. Before he even settles into the devoted pose, Tubbo lunges forward, tackling him into a massive hug and pulling him up onto his feet. The deviant leader is grinning so wide, so painfully wide, it forces tears down his cheeks. They stand together, in front of the hoard of androids, and raise their clasped, naked hands above their heads.

Fall takes its time settling in, but it settles heavy once here. Each day seems to be covered in early morning frost, although it doesn't stick around long under the sun.

Today proves no different. His breath comes in cloudy puffs, and despite shoving his hands deep within the pockets of his well-worn jacket, Wilbur can't seem to keep warm. He bounces on the balls of his feet to get his blood moving, cursing when the movement slams his hip right into the edge of one of the metal tables. A thin layer of frost coats the table, and it freezes his hand when he reaches out to steady the damn thing.

Once upon a time, he came here with Tommy, in the earlier days of their partnership but not *too* early days. At this point in their journey, most of the hostility had melted away, leaving only the precursory objections. At this point, he allowed himself bits and pieces of stolen affection. He stood here, at this very table, with Tommy. He ate an unhealthy burger, slurped a massive soda, and bore Tommy's whinging about his health.

The table wobbles even more as Wilbur braces his elbows on the thing. Bumps and irregular pieces of jagged metal dig into his arms even through the thick coat. What a shitty place, with nothing to boast other than the above-average food. His visits here came less and less frequently until, one day, he stopped coming altogether. And that visit with Tommy, that was nearly a year ago.

Sometimes, he gets bowed over by the fact that he's known Tommy for a year now. It's such a short amount of time, for someone so important. Sometimes, he feels like he's known Tommy his whole life. Or alternatively, like every single moment since Fundy's death—every second of agonizing pain, of debilitating apathy—was in preparation for the universe's apology.

Before he can dissolve further into melancholy, into melodramatic reminiscence, Quackity bumps his shoulder as he approaches, sliding his tinfoil-wrapped burger in front of him. Phil takes his place on the other side of the table. It's an odd duo, but it seems both of them had the same idea when separately approaching him this morning—to get him out of the house.

He wouldn't be here if not for them, the grudging part of his brain grumbles. The sun has just risen, sitting pretty on the horizon in a blaze of red-gold, and it's fucking cold. And this? Standing in the fucking cold with a health hazard of a burger isn't his idea of a good time anymore.

But with the rebellion, with all the uncertainty, not many places feel safe opening anymore, not in the wake of the latest demonstration. Wilbur has spent the past few days in constant, paranoid immobility, caught between religiously checking the news for any update and glaring at the motionless front door.

Despite the veritable news explosion since that final demonstration, none of it had been very telling. The remainders of L'Manburg had been given accommodations to stay in, Cyberlife had been given a temporary halt on producing androids, and several meetings had been scheduled between the president and Tubbo to 'assess the validity of this new form of intelligent life'.

However, there had been no sight of the deviants since the original broadcast. No sight of Tommy since he led the charge that saved the rebellion, face streaked with blood and glitter

as war paint. Wilbur has lost count of how many times he's rewatched it, sitting too close to the TV to drink in the details. There had been something so foreign to him, then, as he stood tall. Tommy had always been determined but this seemed like a whole new level. Not the mechanical hunter. Not the traumatized deviant in denial.

A warrior. A savior.

Wilbur couldn't help but rewatch it again and again, watching the moment he stops before Tubbo, the look on their leader's face as it crumbles into childish relief and resplendent joy. As they crash together, hands forming painful fists into each other's hair, nearly sobbing as they lean their full body weight together. How all the deviants stumble out of their hopeless stupor, crowding together, pressing kisses to strangers' faces. He spots Red and Blue as they take turns cradling Tommy's face and pressing trembling, tear-slick lips to his forehead.

But he hasn't seen Tommy since. No sign nor word from him despite those intimate glimpses. Eventually, both Q and his own father got sick of his helpless, wasteful worrying and decided to take him out to an unhealthy, freezing breakfast.

With a sigh, he unpeels the tinfoil from the burger, watching steam curl from it. "Thanks," he says belatedly before digging in.

For a while, they eat, taking turns in between bites to fill the silence with conversation. Quackity does most of the talking—Phil, it seems, can't help but steer towards work and current events—and it's perfectly inane. Soap operas he watched on TV, plans for Halloween, even though it's still a few weeks away, anything that comes to mind.

Wilbur listens and hums along, although he remains silent and chews his burger thoughtfully. He watches the road despite the irrationality of his thinking—how would Tommy know to find him here, why would he choose now to show up—and half expects to see him approaching from the distance.

He'll come back, this Wilbur knows with certainty. Because Tommy promised, and even if the trust doesn't come as easily as it once did, trust can be practiced. Trust can be mended. Wilbur trusts Tommy, even when he has to force himself to.

He finishes his burger quicker than his companions, and then forces himself to participate in the conversation. Unfortunately, with Tommy on the brain, that's all he can talk about. He and Quackity had been watching the broadcast together, painfully gripping each other through the worst of it and then gleefully slapping each other when he appeared.

"It's fucking cold out here," Wilbur decides, long after the conversation has faded, long after they've all finished their burgers. He guides them to a trashcan on the edge of the street so they can toss their damp tinfoil away. Now that he's out, now that the cold sun bathes the day and melts away the frost, he finds that he doesn't want to go back just yet.

It's then that he hears distant footsteps, pitter-pattering and echoing along the empty street. There aren't many people out, but he ignores it, turning to Quackity to suggest they go elsewhere. Before he can even open his mouth, something crashes into him, knocking the

wind out of him. He collapses onto the ground. Something heavy and clinging lands on top of him, squeezing around his midsection. "What the fuck—"

Then he hears it. The braying laugh of a dying, wheezing donkey. The most human sound in the world, tinged with a bit of breathless desperation, with disbelieving joy.

Wilbur wraps his arms around Tommy before the thought even solidifies, jabbing his bony chin into the top of his skull and curling a hand at the nape of his neck. "You piece of shit," he says into his hair, shiny and gold. "You little bitch boy."

Tommy laughs, bright and joyous, and raises his head from Wilbur's chest. His cheeks glow blue from the cold wind and the delirious force of his own happiness, eyes crinkled at the corners. "Surprise, motherfucker," he says in that reedy, obnoxious voice that Wilbur loves more than life itself, that he's missed like a limb.

No, this isn't the mechanical hunter. This isn't the traumatized deviant in denial. It isn't even the warrior savior.

This is just Tommy, as Wilbur always knew him—painfully and unabashedly himself.

"You could've broken my goddamn hip," he complains, even as Tommy slides off him, hauls him to his feet with ease. Tommy, predictably, rolls his eyes. He's wearing the baseball cap he left in, pulled low but not covering his LED. Wilbur presses his thumb against it.

"You're not that old, Wil. Not as old as this guy." He smiles at Phil, standing with raised brows. "Hiya, Captain. Big Q." He slaps Quackity's shoulders excitedly and receives frantic slaps in return. Big Q's smile is painfully wide. "Did you guys see me on TV?" he asks brightly, excited. "Did you? I bet I looked so badass."

"I did see you," Wilbur agrees. "How the *fuck* did you and Tubbo become friends?"

"Best friends," Tommy announces proudly with that smug, shit-eating smile Wilbur is painfully fond of. Something within him settles for good; life is shitty and unpredictable, and not everything is or ever will be okay. But he has Tommy; he thinks that's enough for him. "It begins like this—I'm pinning Tubbo to the ground, my hands wrapped around his throat—"

Chapter End Notes

That's a wrap! I've said this before and I'll say it as many times as I fucking want to, but thank you all so much not only for reading, but for sticking around this whole time. So many comments on the chapter before this were about how long you've all been here for, and that's insanely crazy. Thank you to everyone who commented and left kudos.

I know you're supposed to write for yourself and no one else, but I have loved sharing this and seeing your reactions. If I were just writing this for myself, I would've never

finished it, but I wanted y'all to have closure so I worked my ass off to get this done by it's two year anniversary <3

I started this fic when I was in a rough place. I was in the middle of my sophomore year of college and the seasonal depression was hitting. I had no idea how to achieve happiness. Working on it has reignited my passion for writing in a really substantial and meaningful way. Even though I'm no longer in the DSMP fandom (and likely won't write for it again), I'm so grateful for it since it really inspired me to keep writing. Now, I'm graduating in the spring and considering pursuing some published original fiction.

Again, thank you all. It's been a fucking wild ride <3

Works inspired by this one

[A Whisper Alive in the Shadows](#) by [Whispering_rose](#)

[these creatures are alive](#) by [arctasy](#)

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